THE WORLD'S NUMBER ONE PC GAMES MAGAZINE

PC GAMER

Revealed! The Official...

TOP 100 GAMES OF ALL TIME

World Exclusive! First Screens!

CRYSIS 2

A mind-blowing new direction!

ALIENS VS. PREDATOR

Hands, jaws & claws-on! We play ALL the races

+ TOP 10 GAMES OF 2010

COVER TITLES ARE CLICKABLE!

MODERN WARFARE 2

PC Gamer's *shocking* verdict!

STARCRAFT II
EXCLUSIVE SCREENS!

MASS EFFECT 2
DARKER, GRITTIER, EFFECTIER!

STAR TREK ONLINE
UNBELIEVABLE ARMADA SHOT!

AND MORE!
SCOOPS! SCREENS! EXCLUSIVES!

$8.99US
02
NUMBER 197
FEB 2010
Future MEDIA WITH PASSION

PC GAMER

FEBRUARY 2010

CLICKING A TITLE TAKES YOU DIRECTLY TO THE ARTICLE

EYEWITNESS

ALIENS VS. PREDATOR 5
JUST CAUSE 2 6
NAPOLEON: TOTAL WAR 7
GLOBAL AGENDA 8
MMO BITS 8
WARCRAFT 15TH ANNIVERSARY INTERVIEW 9
DEV MAN TALKING: DEVELOPERS' TOP GAMES OF ALL TIME 11
COMMAND & CONQUER 4: TIBERIAN TWILIGHT 12
SINS OF A SOLAR EMPIRE: DIPLOMACY 13
TRENDS: GAMER CHARITIES 13
RELEASE METER 13

FEATURES

TOP 10 GAMES OF 2010 14
100 BEST GAMES OF ALL TIME 22

REVIEWS

THE SABOTEUR 31
CALL OF DUTY: MODERN WARFARE 2 33
SHATTERED HORIZON 35
DARKWIND 36
SAW 36
TALES OF MONKEY ISLAND: CHAPTER 4 36
SERIOUS SAM HD: THE FIRST ENCOUNTER 37
DIRT 2 38
JAMES CAMERON'S AVATAR: THE GAME 39
KING'S BOUNTY: ARMORED PRINCESS 39

HARD STUFF

CONTROLAPALOOZA 2: MICE & JOYSTICKS 42
CHOOSING A MANLY MOUSEPAD 43

DEPARTMENTS

EDITOR'S NOTE 3
LETTERS 4
EXTENDED PLAY: LEFT 4 DEAD MODS 40
BACKSPACE 44

PLEASE NOTE

Screen shots and other artwork in this pdf have been downsampled and compressed. For the most accurate representation of game artwork please refer to your hard copy of PC Gamer.

THERE'S A NEW SHERIFF IN TOWN

THE WORLD IS TOAST IN 2012.

At least, that's what the Mayans and director Roland Emmerich would have us believe. OK, the descendents of the Mayans are saying they were misquoted, but then, they would; I'm guessing that right about now they're secretly spiriting away crates of tuna, thousands of gallons of Evian water and netbooks pre-installed with *Peggle* into their spaceships, (cleverly disguised as ancient pyramids) preparing to bail just before the apocalypse hits the rest of us.

As for myself, well, I'm ready too. I can watch the ground split beneath my feet and fall into a chasm filled with molten lava knowing that I got to be the nerd in charge of the very coolest magazine in the entire world. I've been with *PC Gamer* for over 10 years now, as a reader and then an editor, and playing PC games ever since I was old enough to not want to go outside. It's not that I don't like console games; it's just that I can't imagine being a console gamer. We PC gamers are a more discriminating breed of gamer. We insist on the freedom to select and configure our own systems, to modify our games into something that's uniquely ours, and create entirely new mediums for expression out of them.

But PC gaming isn't just the first videogame platform—it is now and always has been the most popular and most innovative videogame platform. And I'm here to make certain that *PC Gamer* continues to deliver to you the very best previews, the most reliable reviews and the most insightful news analyses, with intermittent injections of puerile humor and puns.

I've been privileged to work under three talented and insanely dedicated Chiefs—Greg Vederman, Kristen Salvatore and Gary Steinman—and have worked alongside every other person who's held the beatin' stick here at *PC Gamer*—Rob Smith, Dan Morris, Gary Whitta and Matt Firme. And I have no intention of screwing up what these estimable folk have built over the years.

What you can expect to get is *more*. More indie gaming coverage. More tactical game coverage. More coverage of the mod scene. More MMO coverage. More coverage of everything PC gamers have always loved and will always love. Because as long as there are PCs, there will be PC gaming. And every month, *PC Gamer* will bring you the best PC gaming coverage.

Well, at least until 2012.

LOGAN DECKER,
EDITOR IN CHIEF

THE PLAYLIST 0210

LOGAN DECKER EDITOR IN CHIEF

I'm resisting a second round of *Borderlands* until I finish my tours of duty in *MW2* and *Dino D-Day*, a frisky *Half-Life 2* mod in which history's greatest monsters—Nazis and dinosaurs—team up.

DAN STAPLETON REVIEWS EDITOR

At the rate I'm progressing through *Dragon Age: Origins*, I'll be older than the damn dragon by the time I finish. But thanks to the great storytelling and combat, at least I'll be a happy old man.

EVAN LAHTI ASSOCIATE EDITOR

Early 2010 is going to be a landslide of massive games (*StarCraft II*!), so right now is the best chance to attack my backlog of unfinished games. *Batman: AA*, *Machinarium*, and *Dead Space* are all overdue.

DAN FITZPATRICK LEAD DESIGNER

I've been teaching my four-year-old son to inflate Pookas and Fygars in *Dig Dug*, the 1982 Atari game. But dropping rocks on enemies gets more points than popping them. Maybe when he's older.

JOSH AUGUSTINE CONTRIBUTING EDITOR

Dragon Age: Origins, how do I love thee? Let me count the ways...actually, I can't begin to fit all of those reasons in such a tiny box. But trust me when I promise you, you were made for me, and I for you.

ERIK BELSAAS INDENTURED SERVANT

When not looting corpses in *Borderlands* with Josh, I've been having fun in *Modern Warfare 2*'s multiplayer, despite the terrors of peer-to-peer matchmaking. Spec Ops mode is worth it.

PRENTICE GEDE KING'S INTERN: ARMORED PRENTICE

After narrowly surviving a nasty case of the swine flu, aka H1N1, I fought back with some acronyms of my own: massive doses of *L4D2* and *MW2* multiplayer. Gaming therapy FTW!

PC Gamer (ISSN 1080-4471) is published 13 times a year, monthly plus a Holiday issue following the December issue, by Future US, Inc., 4000 Shoreline Court, Suite 400, South San Francisco, CA 94080. Periodicals Postage Paid at South San Francisco, CA and at additional mailing offices. Newsstand distribution is handled by Time Warner Retail. Subscriptions: One year basic rate (12 issues & 12 CDs: U.S.:$29.95. Canada: $49.95. Foreign: $69.95. Canadian price includes postage and GST (GST #128220688). For customer service, write PC Gamer Customer Service, P.O. Box 5158, Harlan, IA 51593-0658. Phone: (800) 898-7159. Online: www.pcgamer.com/customerservice. Subscriptions do not include newsstand-only specials. Postmasters please send change of address to PC Gamer, P.O. Box 5158, Harlan, IA 51593-0658. Corporate, advertising sales, circulation, editorial and production offices: Future US, 4000 Shoreline Court, Suite 400, South San Francisco, CA 94080. Phone: (650) 872-1642. Fax (650) 872-2207. Website: www.futureus.com. Editorial information should be addressed to: Editor, PC Gamer, 4000 Shoreline Court, Suite 400, South San Francisco, CA 94080. Overnight delivery parcels should be addressed to: PC Gamer, 4000 Shoreline Court, Suite 400, South San Francisco, CA 94080. Unsolicited manuscripts cannot be returned or acknowledged. Future US publishes Guitar World, Mac|Life, Maximum PC, Nintendo Power, PlayStation: The Official Magazine, Pregnancy, Revolver, Windows: The Official Magazine and The Official Xbox Magazine. Entire contents copyright 2009 Future US. All rights reserved. Reproduction in whole or in part without permission is prohibited. Reproduction on the Internet of the articles and pictures in this magazine is illegal without the prior written consent of PC Gamer. Products named in the pages of PC gamer are trademarks of their respective companies. Future US is not affiliated with the companies or products covered in PC Gamer. IPM# 0781118. Produced in the U.S.A. Ride-along Enclosures in the following edition(s): B1, C1, C2, C3, C4. Standard enclosures: None. Publications Mail Agreement #40043631. Returns: 4960-2 Walker Road, Windsor ON N9A 6J3.

LETTERS

ROLE-PLAYERS' CORNER

It might interest you to know that I'm a 51-year-old female gamer—we do exist! And as an RPG fan, I want to thank you for your cover story on *Dragon Age: Origins* in the Holiday issue. Sometimes it feels as if your magazine is exclusively first-person shooters or WWII strategy games, but this issue was a real treat for role-players everywhere!

CORY KERENS

SECOND-CLASS MODERN WARRIORS

It's starting to feel like some of the top developers out there don't care about the PC anymore. Recently I went from wanting to pre-order *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2* to not even thinking of stealing it. First came the $60 price tag, then no dedicated server support, then the 18-player maximum and finally no console commands. My favorite part is when an Infinity Ward representative highlighted "mouse support" as a PC-exclusive feature. Developers should take a little more care in porting an Xbox/PS3 game to PC, rather than just a simple copy/paste.

SAM HELGEVOLD

How does being covered in blood and gore make you *feel*?

INSUFFICIENT CHAOS

I want to be Chaotic Evil, but I find myself a family counselor instead. *Dragon Age* is too much talk, too much video, too linear. I can't go two steps without someone telling me his life story. I feel I'm a character in someone else's movie; I'm playing someone else's game. I don't want to save anyone's kingdom. Disappointed. Perplexed. PETER CORTLAND

Apparently there were two release dates for *Modern Warfare 2*: November 10 for those who bought the game in a store, and November 12 for those who bought or pre-ordered digitally on Steam. The rumor going around is that this was done so that Steam would not hog all the sales from the stores for this game, but where does it leave the good folks who pre-ordered the game in hopes of playing on November 10?

I went as far as buying early and preloading to get instant access the moment it's released, and all it buys me is a two-day wait? Well, I will say this about this mucked up release schedule: I will never buy any Steam game again! From now on I will go and buy retail rather than being shafted this way. BRUNO BERNIER

Neither Valve nor Activision would comment on the delay, but we can make an informed guess as to what happened behind the scenes. Because Steam is installed with every retail copy of MW2 *as copy protection, retailers like GameStop objected to selling a product that installs a competitor's digital distribution software and threatened not to carry the PC version.*

So Valve may have made a Faustian bargain: calculating that Steam would gain a truckload of future customers from retail buyers who now have Steam on their systems, Valve agreed to delay the release date for digital sales. Such a decision might have made sense from a pure numbers perspective, but (if this really is what happened) it's also a dirty trick to pull on Steam's most loyal customers.

At any rate, we recommend that Steam users look very closely at the release date before "pre-purchasing" (in Valve's parlance) a game. Unless a specific release date is promised—note that Valve's wily press release preceding the launch of Modern Warfare 2 *said that the game would launch worldwide "the week of November 8 at retailers and via Steam"—you might want to hold onto your cash until the last minute.*

LETTERS

Speak up!
What's that? We didn't quite catch what you said...Nope, still nothing. We can see your lips moving, but there's no sound. Must be a loose connection somewhere. Perhaps if you tried emailing us at Letters@PCGamer.com?

WIN!

DRAGON AGE: ORIGINS

Don't let Eric The Evil Game-Hoarding Intern™ keep all those copies of *Dragon Age* for himself! Pluck them from his greedy clutches and embark on your own dark fantasy adventure. Enter to win a copy by emailing Contests@PCGamer.com with "Let go, Erik The Evil Game-Hoarding Intern!" in the subject line and your name and mailing address in the body. See full contest rules on page 95.

PC GAMER AFTER HOURS

MESSAGE BOARDS
PC Gamer Podcast Forum pcgamerpodcast.com
GamesRadar PC Gaming Forum snipurl.com/h6oor

FACEBOOK facebook.com/pcgamermagazine
TWITTER

Logan: **ARockLegend** Dan: **DanStapleton** Evan: **ELahti** Josh: **JAugustine** Erik: **Belsaas** Prentice: **PrenticeGede**

MULTIPLAYER
PC Gamer Steam Group
http://steamcommunity.com/groups/pcg
PC Gamer/Maximum PC Team Fortress 2 Server IP
66.151.138.34:27015

"I think that you were a little harsh on the Game Club discussion of *Dark Forces 2: Jedi Knight*."

EVAN YOUAISIS

"You know you can't get enough of me."

HOW MANY BITS?

There is one item that I have never seen addressed in any of your reviews or anywhere in your fine mag: How well do games play on a 64-bit version of Windows? I know the majority of programs were and are still written for 32-bit, but does having access to the large RAM-handling capabilities of 64-bit Windows improve load times and other "housekeeping" chores not handled by the GPU? Also, will game developers start writing code for 64-bit windows as more gamers upgrade to multicore systems? TONY BREJWO

Nope, there's no big gaming advantage to running 64-bit Windows, but generally speaking current games will perform at least as well on 64-bit machines. (Some older games may have difficulties—Google before you leap!) However, we don't think you can ever have too much RAM, and 64-bit Windows is the only way to handle more than 3GB of the stuff. Current games are starting to bump up against the 3GB limit in their recommendations, so you'll be making the switch sooner or later.

JEDI KNIGHT IN SHINING ARMOR

I think that you were a little harsh on the Game Club discussion of *Dark Forces 2: Jedi Knight* in the Holiday issue. I don't think you gave enough credit to the fact that the game gave you a full arsenal of conventional sci-fi weaponry, a lightsaber, *and* a full array of Force powers. On top of that, your actions determined whether or not you were light or dark side, giving two endings! Come on! EVAN YOUAISIS

PRTSCN Drag Me To... Normandy?

We suppose that it's possible that there exists an alternate universe in which the Allied forces of Operation Overlord were met not by Nazi trogs but by zombies, Boomers, Hunters, Witches and Smokers instead.

Send your favorite images and screenshots to the PC Gamer *Historical Archives at letters@pcgamer.com. If we print them, you will stand shoulder-to-shoulder-mounted-rocket-launcher with the gods and goddesses of PC gaming history!*

SAD PANDA'S CORRECTION BOOTH

■ In our January issue hands-on preview of *BioShock 2*, we said that the first level takes place at Ryan Amusements—where the player explores an anti-surface propaganda amusement park created by Andrew Ryan to indocrinate Rapture's children. We were so wrong. It turns out that it's just an early level, and there's more to the opening of *BS2* we'll see next issue.

10 YEARS AGO

ISSUE 74 FEBRUARY 2000

COVER STORY: *Half-Life*: The Next Wave! Everything you need to know about all the new *Half-Life* games, including an exclusive look at *Team Fortress 2* (the unreleased realistic version) and the *Opposing Force* review.

IN THE NEWS: Bethesda shows off six upcoming games: *Art of Magic, Sea Dogs, Skip Barber Racing, Storm* and *Dreamland. Dreamland* (an *X-COM* successor) and *Storm* (a *Wing Commander*-style space combat game) are never released. *Duke Nukem* voice actor John St. John claims to be able to beat up Bruce Campbell, ("Hey Bruce, I'm not out there trying to get film roles…how about leaving the voice-overs to us voice guys, huh?") and Backspace interviews LucasArts' adventure game brain Tim Schafer. (PCG: Did playing *Doom* ever make you want to kill anybody? TS: Yes, but after I killed them the feeling went away.)

PREVIEWED: *Deus Ex, Hitman, High Heat Baseball 2001, Rogue Spear: Urban Operations*

NOTABLE REVIEWS: *Half-Life: Opposing Force* ("So much more than just an expansion pack, *Opposing Force* is a worthy follow-up to the best PC game ever made." 94%), *Unreal Tournament* (90%), *The Wheel of Time* (90%), *Age of Wonders* (91%), *SWAT 3: Close Quarters Battle* (88%), *Flanker 2.0* (89%)

BIG LOSER: *Nations* (10%) "The box says it's 'incredibly realistic,' but don't you believe that for a second."

HARDWARE: 3Dfx's GeForce-killer 64/128MB Voodoo4's and 5's are previewed—The Voodoo5 6000 draws so much current that requires its own power adapter. How could it fail?

Versus

VITALS
DEVELOPER Rebellion
PUBLISHER SEGA
RELEASE Jan–Mar 2010
LINK sega.com/games/aliens-vs-predator

One terrifying sci-fi story, three unique perspectives. We go hands/claws/jaws-on with the campaigns of Aliens vs. Predator

BY EVAN LAHTI AND ERIK BELSAAS

I'm a Colonial Marine, and I'm about to die.

My squadmates are holding position inside an abandoned strip club on planet BG-386, boasting over the radio that they've managed to get the electricity running again. "The lights are on, everything but the booze is flowing!" a lieutenant calls out. Then a panicked cry, and silence. This won't end well.

The bar is empty when I get there. A giant, holographic hooker is twirling on a pole, and xenomorphs are crawling the walls like scorpions with Marge Simpson-shaped heads. But I can't see them. My radar HUD pings with moving contacts in all directions, and I panic. I throw my three stick-flares at the ground, hoping the red glow will illuminate them.

Sgt. Lahti

This what the Marine campaign is about in a nutshell: putting you in situations where the phrase "Game over, man!" is rattling around in your head...and you can't shake it out. I've got one grenade left in the chamber of my M41A pulse rifle. There are four contacts on my radar. Everyone in the strip club is dead, and Sigourney Weaver is not coming to save me.

I'm a Predator.

I've been dropped onto a planet with one mission: To figure out why the humans opened our vault, and to hunt down and kill as many serpents (aliens) as possible. I can cloak. I've got heat-sensitive vision. I've got a shoulder-mounted cannon that melts Marines with hot plasma. I've got gauntlets equipped with blades that would make a Klingon proud and I've got the infamous, neck-seeking, decapitating smart disc. And I just used it to blow up an entire Colonial Marine spacecraft.

But trust me; operating as a Predator on planet BG-386 isn't going to be a walk in the park—unless it's a park littered with Colonial turrets that can spot and shoot me even if I'm cloaked. Every environment is a dangerous hunting ground.

Right now, I'm cornered in a courtyard with six Marines and two turrets. I've cloaked and hopped atop a building. Using my all-purpose wrist computer to project a sound into an alleyway out of sight of the turrets, I lure one of the Marines away from the group just long enough rip his spine out the bottom of his stomach. Unfortunately it wasn't a quiet kill, and the screaming and explosion of blood got his buddies' attention, leaving me with a fight or flight choice: charge up my shoulder cannon and hope I can nuke'em before they riddle me full of bullets, or cloak and jump

And behind door number three...

Predaerik

up and out of danger. Realizing I'm outgunned, I opt to flee.

It's these situations that make playing as the Predator so challenging and dynamic. While I am incredibly versatile, I can't always go in guns blazing, and I can't simply sneak by everything. I have to jump incredible distances. I have to use my vision modes to scope out targets and plan my attack. I have to use my weapons to their full capabilities. This isn't a game where I'm hovering my crosshairs over a concrete barrier, waiting for a terrorist to appear behind it. I have to hunt, and it feels good.

WORLD FIRST HANDS-ON

Playing as the Alien is like being Batman in space.

Like cats, the alien's tails transmit subtle cues about their mood.

100-shot clips. No ironsights. The M41A Pulse Rifle doesn't know the meaning of the phrase "short, controlled bursts."

Ceiling-crawling as the Alien is such satisfying role-reversal. Finally, *you're* the heard-but-unseen threat lurking around.

I'm an Alien. The humans have my mom (the Alien Queen) in prison, so I'm kind of like Bambi, except with two sets of razor-sharp teeth, claws and highly corrosive acid for blood. I will bite the humans. I will stalk them. And with all the anger of my cold-blooded species, I will attach facehuggers to their skulls to give them the unholy gift of my bursting-out-of-stomach children.

Alievan

But before that, I have to escape. I'm locked inside a Weyland-Yutani Corp. facility, where my xenomorph brethren are being birthed and militarized by the company for unknown ends. In a tutorial level, scientists train me how to lunge, how to hiss and lure humans away from their post, how to destroy light sources with my spear-tipped tail to stay hidden in the dark. They peer into my holding cell behind armored glass with approval. Then they send in an unsuspecting janitor ("What, you want me to fix the lights? Okay,"). I leap onto him, hollowing his eye socket with my 10-foot tail.

Playing as the Alien is like being Batman in space. You're nimble; you cling to ceilings, descending only to gut, slash or decapitate marines that have wandered away from their squadmates. Walls, ventilation ducts, undersides of staircases, ledges—every surface is crawlable and easily hopped between.

Taking advantage of a timely distraction (some idiot human opened a vault), I free myself and apply that agility to my first objective, hive-minded to me by the Queen: "Kill everything that gets in your way."

I rend a few Marines with my claws, hopping back up to the ceiling between kills to make myself a difficult target. When the last Marine is toast, I drop back down on top of a terrified civilian engineer, grab him, and wait for the context-sensitive command to use a facehugger to finish him off in the worst way possible.

A second later, I leap inside an air duct. Holding down the sprint key turns the duct into a blur of sheet metal and dust. I'm moving with terrifying speed—faster than I've ever moved in a game without turning on cheats. I descend into a control room, crawl to a terminal and, with a press of my mouse's thumb button, extend my inner set of jaws to mash the big red "Do Not Push or We All Die" button. My Queen is free. A caption appears at the bottom of the screen as a Weyland-Yutani scientist mutters down the hall: "We're fu*%ed."

WHY CAN'T WE WAIT FOR AVP

- ✔ One story, three perspectives
- ✔ Asymmetrical multiplayer
- ✔ The second-best lighting we've seen in a game all year (the best: *Metro 2033*)
- ✔ "Besides the fact it's fun sticking face huggers on poor colonists? Well, there is the propagation of the species thing, but I just think it's fun." —Wyman Jung, Brand Manager at SEGA, when we asked what incentive players have to harvest humans as the Alien in *AvP*.

WHEEEEEE!

Hitchhiker's guide to Panau Island
Use the grappling hook to hitch a ride to a moving car, not your thumb. That way it's not optional.

1

Drive safe
Forget everything *Grand Theft Auto* taught you about carjacking. Mount the roof and surf the car. If the driver objects, kill him.*

2

VITALS
DEVELOPER Avalanche Studios
PUBLISHER Square-Enix
RELEASE March 23
LINK justcause.com

Off the Hook

SPIDER-MAN, STUNT MAN; A QUICK GRAPPLING-HOOK SWING THROUGH *JUST CAUSE 2*

3

Airlift
Build up speed, but be ready to eject—you've probably earned the attention of a few gun-toting motorists, and they're shooting your automobile. When the car's aflame, it's time to go. Calmly exit the vehicle and deploy your parachute.

4

Drop a line
Hold on! We're not done hitchhiking. Glide on until you spot a helicopter, then fire your grappling line to the airship's hull. Reel yourself in.

5

Locate your nearest exit
Being shot at again? Is your chopper about to smash into a cliff? Dangle from your grapple point to search for a new ride. Ooh, look down there—a Humvee!

*Please drive responsibly.

WWW.PCGAMER.COM

the spy

If there's one thing The Spy has learned in his decades of covert operations, it's that it's not over until it's over.

MMOGATE

Though The Spy still has his deft fingers crossed for a *Firefly* MMO, he'd settled for a *Stargate Worlds*, a title that the gaming public feared fell into the dark zone known as Vaporware. A long period of silence from developer Cheyenne Mountain had us all confused: would the game ever emerge from its ripley space portal? Yes, apparently. Cheyenne claims *Stargate Worlds* will be released in 2010.

GHOST OUT OF THE SHELL

But it's not only in the MMO world that The Spy has been slinking around. He's also heard evidence that there are strange happenings in the world of the first-person shooter. The most high-profile leak came from actor Craig Fairbrass, who voiced the Ghost character in *Modern Warfare 2*. At a London launch event, the actor was heard to say: "In this game I'm now voicing a guy called Ghost, who now just got a spin-off comic of his own and they're talking about another little game to go with it. So I'm quite excited about it."

FANBASE: IGNITE

Another spillage of info-beans happened in a recent interview with *Might & Magic* creator Jon Van Caneghem, who's joined the *Command & Conquer* team to lead "a new digital model that is going to re-ignite the fan base for this franchise" (The Spy's best guess: *C&C* will get a free-to-play, browser-based, *Battlefield Heroes*-style iteration in 2011).

FANBASE: IGNITE

Finally, the Spy's prehensile nose has caught wind of some lofty ambitions for the *Mass Effect* series. While nestled in the corner of BioWare bossman Ray Muzyka's office, The Spy overheard hints that the future of the series might contain co-op play. The Spy has discovered that everything is better when done with a friend. Even hard espionage. Mrs. Spy agrees. Spy out.

SPY ILLUSTRATION: DAVID LYTTLETON

Nap Attack!

All nations' infantry units are not created equal—some are stronger, faster or tougher.

Bottlenecked on a bridge, my superior numbers couldn't help me.

VITALS
DEVELOPER Creative Assembly
PUBLISHER Sega
RELEASE February 2010

We squeeze into the tiny shoes of one of history's greatest generals in the world's first hands-on with Napoleon: Total War

SINCE WE FIRST REVEALED *Napoleon: Total War* in our November 2009 issue, we've been contemplating the game-changing implications of the new supply line mechanics that whittle away armies as they move through enemy territory, and the whirlwind two-week-per-turn timescale (as opposed to six months) that Creative Assembly is introducing in the follow up to last year's huge historical strategy game, *Empire: Total War*.

Now Kieran Brigden, CA's communication manager, fills me in on a few other changes made to the turn-based portion of the game before turning over the controls for a tactical confrontation. "Because Napoleon fought a type of warfare that's based on key, very quick battles in two or three locations that brought entire empires to their knees, we want to encourage players to fight in that kind of style," he says.

Brigden says that rather than capturing a country territory by territory until you've wiped it off the map, you'll blitz your way through the countryside and fight in strategic locations, but doing so requires that you plan ahead to ensure your army doesn't freeze or starve in the process. He adds that the AI controlling the actions of your rival nations has improved to handle this style of warfare, building off of the improvements that CA has made since the launch of *Empire* and creating an all-seeing "director" AI that will nudge oblivious country AIs by pointing out obvious threats from a bigger-picture perspective.

Brigden loaded up a tactical battle for me based on the Battle of Lodi, where Napoleon first made a name for himself as a military commander by upsetting the Austrians in what is now in modern-day northern Italy. Playing as Napoleon's army, my primary objective was to capture or kill the Austrian general before he fled the battlefield to regroup with the main Austrian force.

As you'd expect from a descendant of *Empire: Total War*, the tactical gameplay in *Napoleon* is very similar. You order your troops around the battlefield, micromanaging their facing and morale to best position them against the enemy—but CA has made some notable tweaks that reflect Le Petite Caporal's style.

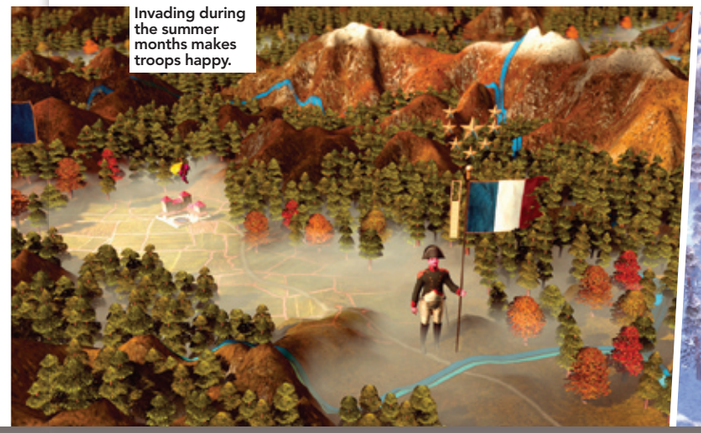
> My primary objective was to capture or kill the Austrian general before he fled.

The biggest change I noticed as I prepared my attack is that generals play a larger role than in previous *Total War*s. Bonaparte gained the respect of his troops by fighting alongside them, and I saw the benefits of putting him on the front lines in the form of a powerful buff to nearby soldiers. But putting your general on the front lines is a double-edged sword, as losing him in battle has disastrous consequences for troop morale.

MY FIRST OBSTACLE was a large building in the center of town that'd been garrisoned by Austrian soldiers. After softening it with cannon fire, I charged a group of infantry inside the building to evict its occupants in melee combat. Meanwhile my cavalry flanked the enemy cannons and riflemen from the west.

The battle was going well, but I was moving too slowly—my advisor popped up to warn me that the Austrian general had begun to flee, and a heavily fortified bridge still stood between me and his escape route. I hastily selected all of my troops and flung them at the bridge, hoping to overwhelm the defenders with numbers. It might've worked, if I'd remembered to make sure that Napoleon himself wasn't leading the charge. The Austrians' opening volleys cut him down, "sending him back to France for recovery" (any other general would be dead) and leaving my troops leaderless and demoralized. Unable to punch a hole in the Austrian lines, I took a few Hail Mary shots with my artillery, but the general was already out of range. I'd swear he flicked me off on his way out, too.

So I'm no brilliant general, obviously. But for those that find even the newly enhanced AI to be a pushover, Brigden says that *Napoleon*'s new drop-in battle feature will up the challenge by allowing a friend or random player (invited through Steam) to take over the role of the AI in this or any other battle in the campaign. Even hardcore players may finally meet their match this time. **DAN STAPLETON**



Invading during the summer months makes troops happy.

Trudging through rough, frozen terrain makes troops dead.

Jetpacks Are Awesome

Three things we love about Global Agenda, the indie spy-fi shooter/MMO you're about to love too

MMO NEWS

ROBOTICS: Mobile defense. Wields a shotgun, deploys turrets, force fields and other tools—kind of like the sci-fi second cousin of the Engineer in *Team Fortress 2*.

VITALS
DEVELOPER Hi-Rez Studios
PUBLISHER TBD
RELEASE Jan–Mar 2010
LINK globalagendagame.com

1) Jetpacks

We firmly believe that attaching rockets to things makes them better. And though *Aion* might've pioneered flight as a combat mechanic in MMOs, *Global Agenda*'s jetpacks aren't simply a thematic accessory for the game's spy-fi setting—they're a critical piece of equipment *every* player has strapped to their back.

GA doesn't allow for free-flying tactics like *Starsiege: Tribes* (your jetpack boost is limited, and draws from the same battery your weapons do), yet jetpacks are nonetheless a liberating addition to your abilities. Platforming between the rooftops of futuristic facilities; launching a surprise attack on a control point by lobbing an EMP grenade through a hole in the roof; even retreating desperately, vertically back to your teammates is a feeling we're thrilled to experience again. And we love the wide level design that accommodates these tactics—ceiling entrances, tiered ledges and other heights that means matches rarely dwell at a choke point for too long.

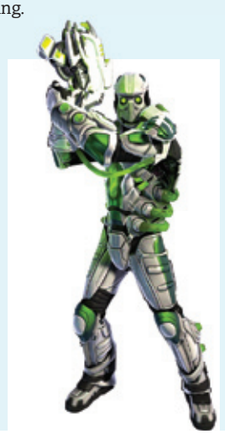
Most combat takes place on the ground, but it's strapping jets to every character's back makes normal combat encounters feel dynamic and unpredictable.

Handymen of the future, the Robotics class can deploy structures to aid allies.

2) Badass Classes

The design of *Global Agenda*'s character classes is drawn from the hundreds of hours its creators (Georgia-based Hi-Rez Studios) have spent with *Team Fortress 2*. And, frankly, that's the best possible source of inspiration. The roles supplied by *TF2*'s classes create a layered set of gameplay mechanics, a food chain where Spies target Medics, Pyros chase Spies and Engineers guard flags and capture points. *Global Agenda* applies the same proven formula: if you're playing as Robotics, you'll focus on laying medical crates, missile turrets and other support structures in the field to create mini-bases to resupply and protect your allies, but you'll be vulnerable to sneaky opponents playing as Recon, who can sabotage turrets and backstab. Medics and Assault characters are usually seen side-by-side, pushing onto capture points or other objectives with the Medic's healing ray tethered to his minigun-toting best friend to keep the hitpoints flowing.

ASSAULT: Suppression, tanking. An amalgam of *TF2*'s Demo, Soldier and Heavy.



MEDIC: Support and debuffing, but combat-capable. We love that the Medic's "Agony Gun" healing tool can also be used on enemies to increase the damage they take.

RECON: Stealth, sabotage. Plants mines on turrets, can use sniper rifles and turn invisible. Similar to the Spy and Sniper in *Team Fortress 2*.

3) Big Cojones

Designing a game that balances the pace of third-person shooter gameplay with the persistency and progression of an MMO is a real challenge—especially for a studio that's developing its first title. Our biggest worry is that the game's pricing model might divide the player base—one-time purchasers will have access to 30 character levels and basic PvP and PvE. Subscribers (at $13/month) will have access to *Global Agenda*'s most ambitious mode: "Alliance versus Alliance," an open campaign that combines base creation, resource accumulation, and crafting with attack and defend matches.

MMO BITS

Fuzzy Friends or Evil Extortionists?

Nothing erupts like an MMO forum when the winds of change start to blow. And blow they did this month when started selling in-game vanity pets to *WoW* players for $10 bucks a piece through their online store. Two unique pets were available at launch: the adorable yet deadly Pandaren Monk and the bane-of-all-life Lich cutie Lil' K.T. We don't think there's much to complain about, especially since *Blizzard* has stated they have no intention of selling anything beyond cosmetic items, and $5 for every Pandaren Monk sold goes to the Child's Play charity.

We Meet Again...

Our favorite part of *Champions Online* (besides making weird baby-men in the character creator) got a big upgrade with the recent Nemesis Confrontation update, which introduces a new lair for your nemesis to plot his evil deeds in. Even better, you and your fellow do-gooders can storm the lair and battle your collective nemeses together, earning new items and perks along the way.

Maybe this time it will be different

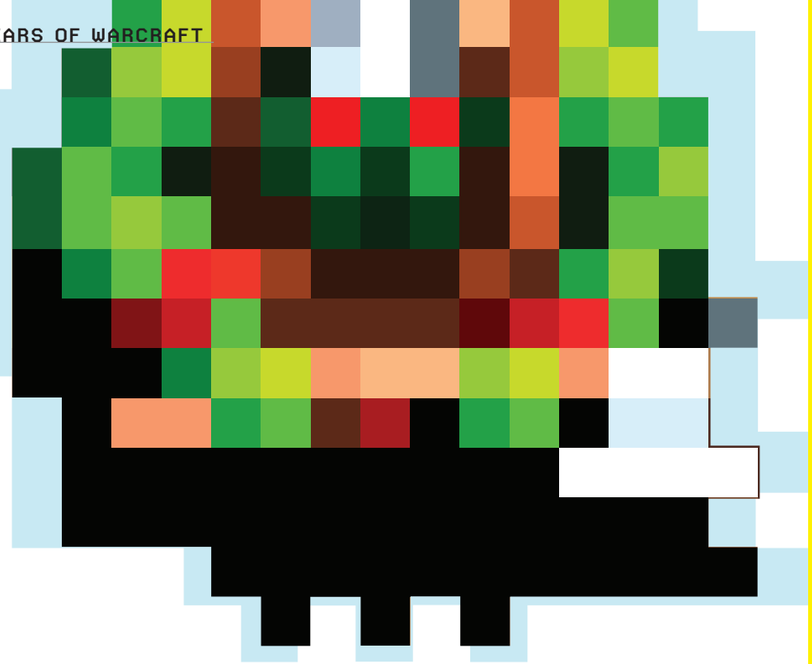
Guild Wars fans have had a bit of a rough roller coaster ride in anticipation of *Guild Wars 2*. First announced in 2007 with an expected beta in 2008, NCSoft CEO Jaeho Lee stated in a conference call with investors that he believes *Guild Wars 2* will enter beta in 2010 and be released in 2011.

What'll it be, Cap'n?

For the first time in at least 3 years, *Second Life* reported a decline in its quarterly total user hours, following a recent crackdown on bots in the game. However, the dip was minor as players still spent a combined 118 million hours logged into the game.

Bye Bye to Botters

EVE Online's latest Quarterly Economic Newsletter (produced by its resident economist) highlights the benefits of CCP's "Operation Unholy Rage" that focused on banning "RMT operators"—"gold farmers" in *WoW* speak. The report shows as much as a 50% decrease in the number of players in systems like Ibura that are infamous for having a large number of these insidious players/botters.



It Began with a Grunt

While hundreds of other game franchises have come and gone, **Blizzard's *Warcraft* series** is stronger now than ever, 15 years after its debut in *Warcraft: Orcs & Humans*. With the help of Blizzard luminaries Chris Metzen and Rob Pardo, *PC Gamer* looks back at *Warcraft*'s ground-breaking history.

Scientists and theologians can debate endlessly whether our universe began with a big bang or a holy word, but there's no doubt how *Warcraft*'s world started: it began with a Grunt. We're not talking about the sensual grunt you might exchange with that someone special, but instead the decidedly un-sensual type of Grunt: the green-skinned, bestial, single-minded orc that's tearing off the limbs of a noble knight. That's *Warcraft*'s world of Azeroth for you—rife with savages, demonic invasions, bitter gods, and bloody wars—but it's also balanced with a sense of hope, and heroes who rise to redeem an entire generation from extinction and forge a better future for their people.

The *Warcraft* franchise—birthed as a 2D real-time strategy game in 1994 and living on today as the world's most popular MMORPG—made the leap between genres to seize gamers with infamously addictive gameplay and rich, mythic stories of tragedy and heroism. In honor of the 15th anniversary of *Warcraft,* as well as the fifth anniversary of the launch of *World of Warcraft*, *PC Gamer* turned to the two the people whose creativity, game design know-how and imagination have powered those games and stories since the beginning—Chris Metzen and Rob Pardo—to find out what inspired the *Warcraft* universe, and to recall the process of bringing it to life.

Chris Metzen: The Brains

Blizzard's Vice President of Creative Development and chief loremaster of all things Warcraft *talks to* PC Gamer *about creating the World.*

PC Gamer: When did you begin telling stories?
Chris Metzen: I spent a lot of my younger years playing *Dungeons & Dragons* and building campaigns for tabletop adventures—it was just something I really enjoyed doing. There's something really special about incorporated story telling, when you have a bunch of people around a table all engaging with each other. The imagination is there, and you're running with a narration organically, throwing in decisions and conversation off the cuff. I've always felt there's a kind of magic about that, and when you apply it to a video game, there's a nice synergy that happens there.

I got hired at Blizzard about 16 years ago when they were making [the first] *Warcraft*. When they were thinking about doing a sequel, even though I was an animator at the time, all I *really* wanted to do was make stuff up, you know? To run with a few ideas from the first game. So they plugged me in as a writer/designer on *Warcraft II* and I just hit the ground running. I started creating clans and places and drawing maps and just had a blast. The ideas [for *Warcraft II*] just got kicked off from there. I really just tried to take everything from *Warcraft I* and explode it out into the world.

"Evil is absolutely real in *Warcraft*... but you have the whole spectrum of black, white and grays in between too."
—Chris Metzen

Do *Warcraft*'s stories ever surprise you?
You know what's funny: if there's an element of surprise it usually hits me much later. For instance, I was just upstairs with the *World of Warcraft* team looking at the Frozen Throne, a location we made six years ago for *Warcraft III* (and in our upcoming patch for *WoW*, we're actually going to get to confront the Lich King there). We've talked about it many times, but actually seeing it immediately took me back and made me think, "How did this idea get so much longevity?" I mean, you make characters, you make choices and these meta-storylines and you hope it's going to keep, that it's going to have resonance and excitement in that game. But just seeing how this little bit of the world is still so evident after all this time is just really shocking.

We're able to tell the story of this rise and fall of the Lich King, once a noble prince. A seven- or eight-year storyline—that's pretty good for a video game! And to have people still invested in that idea and coming back to it—the fact that it's finally coming full circle—there's a really weird satisfaction in that. How amazing is it that people still care about these ideas? That we're still able to chase them and render them is just an amazing opportunity.

Do the concepts of "good" and "evil" exist in the *Warcraft* universe, or is it all just shades of grey, with everyone out to do their own version of good?
Evil is absolutely real in *Warcraft*...but you have the whole spectrum of black, white and grays in between too. What's interesting about *Warcraft* is that in *Warcraft I*, the noble humans and evil orcs were very one-dimensional. It was pretty much good guys vs. bad guys, and what really interested me was challenging that idea. I love the idea that the

(Continued on page 20)

Rob Pardo: The Brawn

Blizzard's Vice President of Game Design talks about building great gameplay to suit a great story

PC Gamer: Was everyone sold on the idea of a *Warcraft* MMO?
Rob Pardo: No, there were definitely non-believers, but for those of us that were into MMOs like *Ultima Online* and *Everquest*, it was a very natural conversation. At that point MMOs were still pretty niche. It was a very small genre compared to others and it had this wacky subscription model that people who weren't playing an MMO swore they'd never pay for.

What challenges did you face moving an established franchise into a new genre?
A good example might be [when we were designing] the Shaman class for *WoW*. I put out the idea, "What if he uses the

totem mechanic?" and the *WoW* designers were like, "*Whoa, whoa, whoa*! You can't do that because the Witch Doctor had totems, and the witch doctor was a troll unit. You can't suddenly have the Shaman doing Witch Doctor stuff. That's *crazy*!" These are *WoW* designers that never worked on *Warcraft III* telling the lead designer of *Warcraft III* that he can't do that, which I just thought was really funny. People got really wrapped up in these conventions from the RTS game. It was almost like we were our own worst enemy on some things and needed to break those conventions and do what's right for an MMO.

When lore and gameplay come into conflict, who usually wins?
There's always push and pull there. Sometimes the gameplay wins, sometimes the lore wins, and sometimes the art wins. At the end of the day though, we're going to do what is best for the game overall. A fun fact: The Druid class almost didn't come to exist because Chris Metzen felt really strongly that Druids should only be available to Night Elf males. And it's like, "Ok, why are we going to have one of our nine marquee classes only be available to a subset of a subset of players?" And when we put it to Chris like that he said, "Okay, well maybe Tauren can do it too, and fine, females can do it." He allowed it once he realized that if he didn't allow it, we weren't going to put the Druid in.

Warcraft Timeline

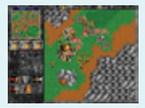
The franchise is born. *Warcraft: Orcs & Humans* is released.
1994

The First War of Azeroth takes place on MS-DOS.

Warcraft II: Tides of Darkness is released.
Dec 9, 1994

Discovery: sheep explode when clicked enough!

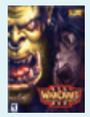
Beyond the Dark Portal expansion is released for *Warcraft II*.
April 30, 1996



The Alliance beats back the orc invasion.

Warcraft: Adventures is cancelled and its story is turned into a novel.
May 22, 1998

Battle.net lets orcs and Humans duke it out online.
September, 1999



Blizzard returns to Azeroth with the release of *Warcraft III: Reign of Chaos*.
July 3, 2002

(Continued on page 20)

orcs might have had a very bright origin, but they got involved in some hairy stuff with demons and got turned into this demonic war machine. Can a culture come back from the brink like that? Can a culture be saved? That's part of what we did in *Warcraft III*. We took Thrall, this sort of orc messiah character who's worked very hard over the years to bring his people back from the abyss and give them an identity and a homeland. I just love the idea of turning [typical fantasy elves] into blood elves, having an entire race of people with an addiction problem. Can they be brought back from the brink of the abyss or does a society sometimes go too far for redemption? I love those polarities. I love the fall from grace and the possibility of redemption, because you can have it come to pass in a unique individual like Kerrigan from *Starcraft* or the Lich King from *Warcraft*, and you can also use those scenes at a societal level. That's always been compelling to me.

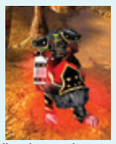
Do you ever try to teach big life lessons in the games or do you think these things just make great stories?
I wouldn't presume that I teach ethics or anything like that, but it's kind of funny. I've had this wonderful career at Blizzard and once [*WoW*] really started to take off and there were more than 10 million players out there, it really started to shake me for a while that I wrote this and millions of people were taking it in. I guess I didn't realize I had been sitting in front of this really big microphone that reached so many people, and it really freaked me out. I was left wondering if had I really paid attention to the kinds of things I'd been responsible for. I want to be conscious about the things I say and the stories I suggest to, whether I'm writing them directly or working with development teams.

There sure are a lot of fallen heroes in the *Warcraft* universe.
So the idea of all these fallen heroes—the price to be paid for playing with fire and the illustration of corruption and redemption—these are things that have always compelled me...I guess that's just my own art and my own vision coming out.

My great hope is that when people look back at this product, it will incite some thoughtful discussion. But I think it gets dangerous when you start chasing or forcing that. This stuff is great, but the greatest value at the end of the day is the feeling of being heroic and even in the dark storylines with corruption and such, I want to make sure it's balanced by the other side of the story: potential redemption and societal healing. I think you just really have to have that balance in mind and not let things tilt too much. You don't want people to be turned off by too much darkness.

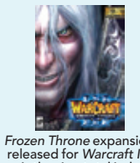
So was Arthas (The Lich King) destined to do what he did, or did he have a choice?
I believe there was always a choice for Arthas. Always, *always* a choice...even though the Lich King believed it was inevitable. Otherwise there would be no tragedy. Otherwise they're all just cogs in the machine and the story loses all sense of cost. I think that choice, in that innate human moment where you decide situationally if you are a hero or villain—that's where all the energy comes from. The choice, that innate struggle. You *could* have all these big epic, heroic Paladin characters that can do no wrong. Nah, that doesn't make things interesting; that just makes them one-dimensional. If you discover that they wrestle with dark thoughts or corruption every day, yet still they toss on their boots and go out every morning and right the wrongs, then it's far more compelling. That's what most people identify with, that's the truth of our existence. It's just people. We put on our shoes one foot at a time, go to work every day and do the best we can do. Having that mirror in this fiction is what makes it sing to people. Despite all the high falutin' magic swords, long ears, and magic kingdoms, it's true to that reflection of us, albeit a clumsy reflection. But it rings true.

"These fallen heroes, the price to be paid for playing with fire ... are things that have always compelled me." —Chris Metzen

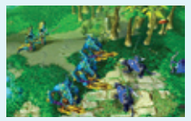


Thrall redeems the orcs and forms the Horde.

July 1, 2003

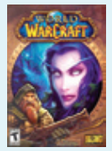


Frozen Throne expansion released for *Warcraft III*. Arthas is a total jerk.



The Naga and Draenei are introduced to the universe.

November 23, 2004



And so it begins. *WoW* is unleashed an unsuspecting public.

You or someone you know started playing *WoW*

You've Come a Long Way, Baby

Just like you'd never know guess that the drooling infant would, eighteen years later, turn into voluptuous Scarlett Johansson, so did the earliest *Warcraft* characters bear little resemblance to their current incarnations. We look back at a few character's transformations over time.

The Warcraft That Never Was

On May 22, 1998, Blizzard announced that development on the adventure game set in the *Warcraft* universe, *Warcraft Adventures: Lord of the Clans*, had been indefinitely suspended (that's Blizzard-speak for "canceled"). So, what'd we miss? Here are four *Warcraft* lore shockers that never made it out.

#1 THRALL AGE: ORIGINS

The story was to follow the life of Thrall as he was raised by a malevolent human to be a murderous war machine, but eventually rebels against his master and becomes a great leader of the orcs. Although the game was canned, Thrall returned as the central figure of *Warcraft III*, although his background story changed.

It's not easy being green.

#2 "ORCISH HORDE, ROLL OUT!"

The mighty orc leader Ogrim Doomhammer was to be voiced by Peter Cullen, the actor who portrayed Optimus Prime in both the original *Transformers* series and the recent Michael Bay summer blockbusters.

#3 DEATHWING DIDN'T INHALE

Even though Blizzard insists that the screenshot of Deathwing smoking a hookah was the result of a "miscommunication" and is not in any way considered canonical *Warcraft* lore, it's still fun to see the angry, death-dealing arch-villain of the next *WoW* expansion in more of a "Puff The Magic Dragon" state of mind.

#4 BLIZZARD MADE THE RIGHT CHOICE IN CANNING IT

All signs indicated that *Warcraft Adventures* had a good style and strong characters, but

The strongest argument for legalizing it: stoned dragons don't go around burning down villages.

Blizzard must've realized that it would have been very difficult to woo audiences recently dazzled by LucasArts' *Curse of Monkey Island*, arguably one of the best-playing and best-looking adventure games of all time. Blizzard prides itself on only releasing the best games, and *Warcraft Adventures* might have felt like a step backward in the genre by the time it came out.

WoW board and trading card games are released. Game on!

Late 2005

WoW movie announced. Everyone breathes sigh of relief that Uwe Boll is *not* directing it.

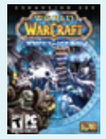
May 2006

The Burning Crusade brings Outland, tentacled aliens and addict elves to *WoW*.

January 16, 2007

WoW enters *The Guinness Book of World Records* with 10 million subscribers.

January 2008



Wrath of the Lich King is released; Arthas is still a total jerk.

November 13, 2008

Games of the Gods

After emerging bloodied and bruised from our battles over the Top 100 PC Games of All Time (on page 49), we realized we should have just put the question to developers, who, like most gamers, were all too happy to tell us which games they think should make the cut.

CHET FALISZEK

Producer, Valve
Projects: *Left 4 Dead, Left 4 Dead 2, Half-Life 2*

IN CHET'S TOP 100

***Threewave CTF*:** I work with Zoid, the creator of this *Quake III* mod. I'm never sure if I should punch or hug him for creating the game that I lost over a year of my life to.

***Desktop Tower Defense v1.5*:** I only made it through shipping *Left 4 Dead* because I had this web game to clear my head. After a certain level of play, it is less playing a game and more mind clearing meditation.

ERICH SCHAEFER

Chief Creative Officer, Runic Games. Projects: *Torchlight, Warcraft III: Reign of Chaos, Diablo*

IN ERICH'S TOP 100

***Ultima Online*:** It had so much more of a sandbox, frontier-justice feel than any of the popular MMOs today. The player was much more empowered to make a difference in the world.

***World of Warcraft*:** *WoW* brings more scope, craftsmanship and polish to the genre than can ever be matched.

DANIEL KADING

Lead Designer, Relic Entertainment. Projects: *Warhammer 40,000: Dawn of War II, Oddworld: Abe's Exoddus*

IN DANIEL'S TOP 100

***Dark Age of Camelot*:** Designed from the start for PvP, *DAoC* was an unlikely massive that pulled off progression-based player warfare. The self-correcting balance of three fully developed realms, combined with great PvE content is a formula I'd love to see in a modern release.

***Impossible Creatures*:** The game that drew me to Relic eight years ago. The creature-combiner was a great idea that was masterfully executed—build warbeasts from the parts of any two animals—and introduced an unprecedented metagame aspect to the RTS genre beyond memorizing a build order.

KEN LEVINE

Creative Director, 2K Boston
Projects: *BioShock, Freedom Force, Thief: The Dark Project*

IN KEN'S TOP 100:

***Heroes of Might and Magic* (series):** Nerd-frigging-heaven. Tons of min-maxing, plus a cast of vampires, mummies, orcs and dragons. It's like D&D without all that awkward talking.

***Master of Magic*:** The one and only. There's never been anything close to it, not even a clone. It remains on my machine to this day and the strategy guide remains in a position of honor on my bookshelf (all 40,000 pages of it).

BRAD WARDELL

CEO, Stardock
Projects: *Sins of a Solar Empire, Demigod, Galactic Civilizations II*

IN BRAD'S TOP 100

***Civilization IV*:** The perfect turn-based strategy game. Endlessly replayable, thanks to a great design and terrific mods.

***Total Annihilation*:** The real-time strategy game that made strategy the centerpiece. Destroyed my life.

BILL ROPER

Executive Producer, Cryptic Studios. Projects: *Diablo, StarCraft, Hellgate: London, Champions Online*

IN BILL'S TOP 100

***Wizardry*:** The first time you could crawl through a dungeon and really feel like you were moving. Amazingly deep and advanced [at the time that] it came out.

***Diablo II*:** A mash-up of action and RPG, this game helped revitalize the flagging role-playing market while also causing great joy and profits amongst companies that sold mice.

DAVE JOHNSTON

Senior Level Designer, Splash Damage
Projects: Creator of *Counter-Strike*'s de_dust

IN DAVE'S TOP 100

***Half-Life*:** The surprise foundation of my career, and indeed a revolution for the FPS conveyor belt.

***Quake*:** If only for the "PHLUMPH... tong tong tong" of the grenade launcher... BOOM.

VITALS
DEVELOPER EA LA
PUBLISHER Electronic Arts
RELEASE March 26, 2010
LINK commandandconquer.com

Base Under Attack!

Evan Lahti and Erik Belsaas duke it out over the bold multiplayer mode changes coming to Command & Conquer 4: Tiberian Twilight

THE COMMANDERS

EVAN Loves Tesla coils; can name all the actresses that played Tanya; actually played *C&C Tiberian Sun* in '99; misses the Westwood Studios era.

ERIK Understands that Kane (Joe Kucan) is a vampire and doesn't age; has fond memories of sneaking the original *C&C* manual into math class.

Kane, 1996

Kane, 2009

EVAN In *Command & Conquer 4: Tiberian Twilight*, your base has legs, multiplayer supports more players (10) than *Modern Warfare 2* and you can't die. Any questions?

ERIK Well, one of the mobile bases actually *flies*—the Support class. The other two classes (Offense and Defense) have legs. And you *can* die, sort of.

EVAN Okay, so technically your base respawns—that's still a serious change in an RTS, right? "Knocking out" opponents is no longer the main objective. But there's also no classic resource gathering. You don't have to build power plants. You gain persistent experience points across all modes, which unlocks units and abilities no matter where you're playing. These all seem like good ideas. But in multiplayer, it's still roughly the same intimidating experience for me—demanding, fast and nuanced. I mean, one class—GDI Support—has *eight* aerial units to choose from. To me, that's *C&C 4* buying into the idea that a wider variety of units is a good thing. I'm not sure if I agree with that.

ERIK But units are all tailored to the class you are playing; Defense has deployable turrets and Offense has giant tanks. GDI Support has the Spanner: a flying medic. They all feel essential to your goals. To me, all these design decisions—the respawns, the elimination of power and currency—form a pretty smart compromise between tradition and evolving game mechanics to make RTS games more accessible.

> **"I just think oceans are dumb."**
> —Erik Belsaas

EVAN You're right that accessibility is key. *Red Alert 3* was a reminder, I think, that modern RTS' can benefit from things like funny cut-scenes, co-op or parachuting war bears to mitigate their complexity. We talked about this at lunch the other day—you're a guy who doesn't even like *water* in strategy games!

"No, you can't come in for tea." After upgrading to Tier II, Defense walkers can deploy this bubble shield.

The lumbering, missile-spitting Mastodons (right) are our favorite GDI unit.

ERIK I just think oceans are dumb; they're an obligation. Does anyone actually like those missions where you have to build amphibious transports and storm a beach? *C&C 4* is appealing because there is so much less of that busywork. You take your giant walking armored house, queue up some units, unpack the HQ and your giant AT-AT-esque Mastodons stomp all over a capture point.

EVAN Your units *do* feel much more like a gang. They're independent—most Nod infantry can shoot at air targets; any ground unit can grab the respawning Tiberium crystals and run them back to base.

ERIK Yep—when we were playing GDI, we always dedicated one of our five players to "crystal duty," usually an Offense class player, because they could build Striker scout mechs. Having a shared team resource for individual upgrades is strange, but it definitely maintains the pace of *C&C 4*, because if you aren't grabbing enough of those crystals for the first half of the game, it's easy for your team to fall behind in tech upgrades.

EVAN Together, having crystal retrieval and point capture as goals within objectives creates something that resembles football and king of the hill simultaneously. You've got lighter recon units like the Striker acting as runners for ferrying crystals that you're trying to intercept, and you've got groups of units butting heads at the control points. And to that effect, I don't like how versatile the units are—I want more single-purpose tanks, repairers, bombers, etc.

ERIK Visually, they're great. I love the scale of the third-tier units, like the GDI Mastodon—they have this earth-stomping sense of weight and power. I kept pausing to watch their legs lift and leave giant prints in the ground. Or the GDI Kodiak, which is basically a flying armored cloud of pain for the Support class.

EVAN Nod has these neat, speedy Spider Tanks that I love. When they're grouped, they create an electric web that damages anything that passes through. But attacking them is fun, too—you feel like you're dismantling this dangerous field of ruby-red energy.

ERIK So what's our verdict on the multiplayer? I mean, when your HQ is getting blown up and respawned every two minutes, you're going to get frustrated...regardless of any system in place to make the game friendlier. It's still devastatingly fast—*C&C* has always been a game where you need to be coordinated and have a plan for at least the first 10 minutes of gameplay.

EVAN The respawns help eliminate some of that "knockout fear," and the semi-strict unit cap is something I love—five Mammoth tanks was about all I could produce when I played Offense. But I'm looking forward to playing campaign in co-op and skirmish more. I love the idea of rolling out these units as well-animated, destructive toys—just not in a competitive environment.

TIBERIAN TWILIGHT IN 44 WORDS

"Set in a world on the cusp of utopia, rescued from the brink of eco-apocalypse by an increasingly unsteady alliance between GDI and Nod, *C&C 4* is an exploration of obsession, paranoia, truth and what it ultimately means to be Kane. All will be revealed."

—Sam "Lore Master" Bass, Producer and Story Lead, EA Los Angeles

TWILIGHT: TIBERIAN IN 24 WORDS

A teenage girl falls in love with an immortal megalomaniac vampire named Kane. Meanwhile, the earth is overrun by radioactive crystals. Angst angst angst.

—attributed to Stephenie Meyer (author, Twilight)

Child's Play: you'll laugh, you'll cry, you'll donate generously.

Give and Let Live

Four charities help gamers spread the holiday spirit all year 'round.

CHILD'S PLAY

Founded by Mike "Gabe" Krahulik and Jerry "Tycho" Brahe of Penny Arcade, Child's Play brings donated games, coloring books, movies and toys to children's hospitals across America. **www.childsplaycharity.org**

DESERT BUS FOR HOPE

If you enjoy a dash of cruelty with your charity, the annual Desert Bus for Hope forces volunteers to play the infamously boring *Desert Bus* game in exchange for donations that support Child's Play (see above). The more money donated, the longer they have to drive. **www.desertbus.org**

DONATE GAMES

Unless you're absolutely certain that you're going to play *Darkest of Days* again, mail your used game to Donate Games. The organization will send you a receipt for your tax-deductible gift, sell the game, and direct the loot to the research and treatment of rare, under-funded "orphan" diseases. **www.donategames.org**

GAMES THAT GIVE

Play free casual games online with corporate logos on them, and 70 percent of the resulting ad revenue goes to your choice of 14 charities. **www.gamesthatgive.net**

THE 17-WORD PREVIEW*: SINS OF A SOLAR EMPIRE: DIPLOMACY

Use Diplomacy to do peaceful negotiations and trade. Use giant armed capital ships to backstab the peaceful.

*Everything you need to know about the second mini-expansion for the interstellar real-time space strategy game.

release meter

WHAT YOU'LL BE PLAYING 0210

Cowboy boots are for men. When cowboy boots go stomping down a hall, it strikes fear into the hearts of everyone. When cowboy boots go stomping into developers' offices, they scream release dates to appease you.

Q1 2010

Aliens vs. Predator	Sega
Assassin's Creed II	Ubisoft
Battlefield: Bad Company 2	EA
BioShock 2	2K
Command & Conquer 4	EA
Dark Void	Capcom
Divinity II: Ego Draconis	CDV
Global Agenda	Hi-Rez Studios
Just Cause 2	Eidos
Mafia II	2K
Mass Effect 2	EA
R.U.S.E.	Ubisoft
Singularity	Activision
Sins of a Solar Empire: Diplomacy	Stardock
Splinter Cell: Conviction	Ubisoft
S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: Call of Pripyat	BitComposer
StarCraft II: Wings of Liberty	Blizzard
Star Trek Online	Atari

Warhammer 40,000 Dawn of War II: Chaos Rising	THQ

LATER 2010

Alpha Protocol	Sega
APB	EA
Arma II: Operation Arrowhead	505 Games
Battlefield 1943	EA
Brink	Bethesda
Crysis 2	EA
DeathSpank	Hothead
Deus Ex 3	Eidos
Elemental: War of Magic	Stardock
Fallout: New Vegas	Bethesda
Homefront	THQ
Max Payne 3	Rockstar
Metro 2033	THQ
Napoleon: Total War	Sega
Rage	EA
Red Orchestra: Heroes of Stalingrad	TBD
Ride to Hell	Deep Silver
Split/Second	Disney Interactive
Star Wars: The Old Republic	EA
Supreme Commander 2	Square Enix
World of WarCraft: Cataclysm	Blizzard

PC GAMER

TOP 10 GAMES OF 2010

You don't have to be psychic (or even particularly bright) to see that 2010 is going to be one of the biggest, most exciting years in PC gaming history. We're used to seeing one genre or another leap forward each year, but this year's lineup shows that just about every genre is getting cutting-edge games that push boundaries and breathe new life into gameplay. It wasn't easy choosing just 10 out of the scads of awesome games we looked at for this story, but we managed to pare the list down to the games that will matter most. If you're skeptical, just turn the page: we're going to prove it.

BY THE GROOVY STAFF OF PC GAMER

STARCRAFT II WINGS OF LIBERTY

REAL-TIME STRATEGY CONQUERS PC GAMING AGAIN

SOMEHOW, IT'S BLIZZARD'S DECADE of bottled-up restraint, cancelled spin-offs, and lack of sequels is what's most exciting about *StarCraft II: Wings of Liberty*. Waiting more than 10 years to revisit the Zerg, Protoss and Terrans shows Blizzard's respect for the franchise, and this reverence permeates *SC2*'s design throughout, from the fine-tuned roster of simple-but-nuanced units each race is allotted to the intricate animations that bring battles to life.

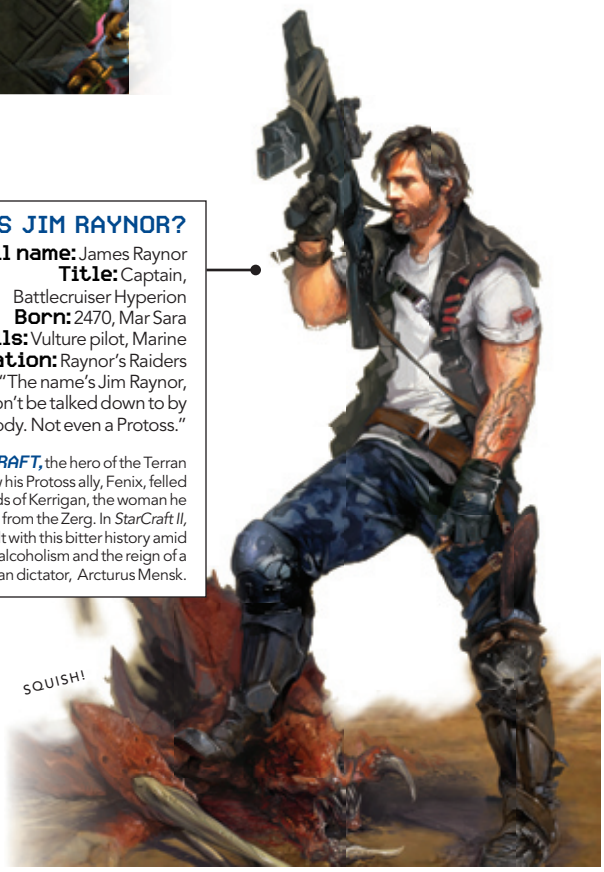
SC2's vibrant color palette and model design communicates unit types and capabilities at a microsecond's glance, and when the arc welder of a boxy SCV constructor crackles and its pilot reports "Job's done!" in a casual, southern drawl, it makes building bunkers a satisfying task (nostalgia may have something to do with it). More encouraging, however, is *SC2*'s focus on story—Jim Raynor's battlecruiser serves as your mobile base in *Wings of Liberty*, with fully-rendered versions of your crew waiting inside to chat up between missions, which you can choose by pulling up the galactic map—a feature that should come in handy as we await the release of the forthcoming Protoss and Zerg campaigns. EVAN LAHTI

DEVELOPER: Blizzard
PUBLISHER: Blizzard
ETA: JAN-MAR 2010

WHO IS JIM RAYNOR?

Full name: James Raynor
Title: Captain, Battlecruiser Hyperion
Born: 2470, Mar Sara
Skills: Vulture pilot, Marine
Affiliation: Raynor's Raiders
Quote: "The name's Jim Raynor, pal. And I won't be talked down to by anybody. Not even a Protoss."

IN *STARCRAFT*, the hero of the Terran campaign saw his Protoss ally, Fenix, felled at the hands of Kerrigan, the woman he failed to save from the Zerg. In *StarCraft II*, Raynor dealt with this bitter history amid galactic war, alcoholism and the reign of a new Terran dictator, Arcturus Mensk.



Litter, benches, a lamppost, public trash receptacles with digital signage: These are the kinds of amenities you'd find in a park intended to soothe, oh, for example, harried urban dwellers looking for a moment of quiet. Our advice: Enjoy it—that quiet won't last.

GOING TO TOWN

THE FIRST DAYBREAK IN THE ORIGINAL *Crysis* was a watershed moment in PC gaming. Crytek had finally done it—created a game so nearly photorealistic that it made you gasp when the first pink rays of daylight came through the trees and the shoreline opened up beneath you. And soon afterwards, you were using the powers of your Nanosuit to pummel North Korean foes into kimchi before facing a vastly more powerful enemy with the deadliest snow cone machine in the universe.

But after *Far Cry*, *Crysis* and *Crysis Warhead*, we figured Crytek wouldn't stay in the dense jungle of the tropics forever. Where, then, would the developer take the next chapter in man vs. metal tentacles? These first screens from *Crysis 2*—the first in-game screens seen anywhere in the world and beyond—as well as an interview with Nathan Camarillo, Executive Producer of *Crysis 2*, give us plenty of clues. Take our word for it: *Crysis 2* won't be a day at the beach. **LOGAN DECKER**

WORLD EXCLUSIVE FIRST SCREENS

CRYSIS 2

DEVELOPER: Crytek
PUBLISHER: EA
ETA: Oct-Dec 2010

PC Gamer: *Far Cry* and *Crysis* are both set on tropical islands—will *Crysis 2* break out of that mold?
Nathan Camarillo: As the screenshots in this article show, we are applying our expertise to a new style of "jungle" which we will discuss more in the upcoming months, but it is definitely far from tropical. We are very excited to introduce *Crysis*-style sandbox gameplay to a different, yet ultimately familiar environment.

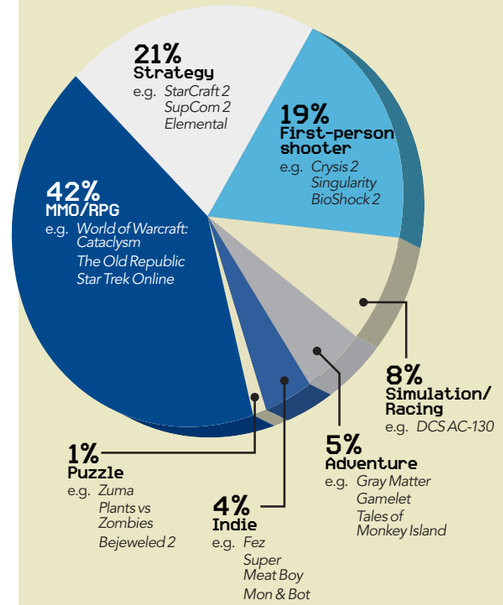
PCG: What kinds of alien types and AI advancements can we expect in *Crysis 2*?
NC: We expect to have increased verticality over the traditional *Crysis* sandbox, and the AI will definitely use that to their advantage.

PCG: Now that *Crysis* is a cross-platform game, have you had to change your design ideas to accommodate the PS3's and the Xbox 360's limited hardware?
NC: Not necessarily. In some ways it has allowed us to avoid overdesigning features to keep the focus narrower and tight for a compelling experience on all platforms. There are many successful cross platform shooter franchises on the market, and it's time [that] *Crysis* sat proudly among that group. PC owners [shouldn't] worry about feeling cheated: Crytek will always push the technological boundaries.

We're pretty sure that thing wasn't made in North Korea...

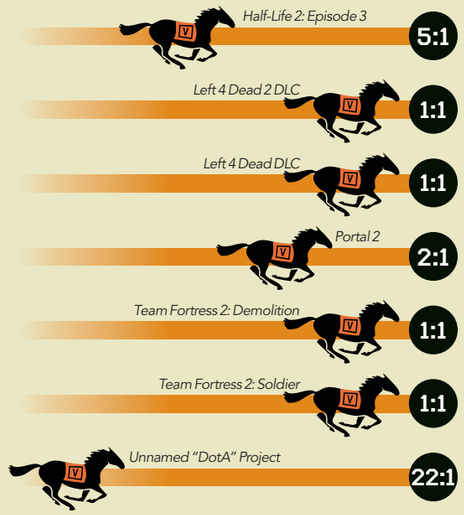
THIS PIE IS NO LIE

PC Gamer's statisticians reveal where your gaming hours will be spent this year:



BETTING ON VALVE

What's coming this year from Valve? *PC Gamer* handicaps the prize-winning horses in the company's stable



STAR WARS THE OLD REPUBLIC

BRIDGING THE GREAT DIVIDE

THERE ARE PLENTY OF SINGLE-PLAYER RPG fans who are put off by the level-grind, cookie-cutter quests and forced camaraderie of the ever-increasing number of online RPGs, and these are the gamers BioWare seems to have had in mind when it designed its first MMO, *Star Wars: The Old Republic*. It plays more like *Dragon Age: Origins* than *World of Warcraft*, complete with a huge, unique story-based campaign for each of the eight player classes and AI-driven companion characters that will accompany you on difficult quests, and it doesn't force you to saddle up with teenagers or maniacs who might shred your nerves and jeopardize your enjoyment.

Best of all, this game is set in the fan-favorite *Star Wars* universe—specifically, the pre-movie era *Knights of The Old Republic* universe that BioWare developed for its historic single-player RPG. We'll soon have the chance to return to it playing as character classes based on *Star Wars* favorites including Luke Skywalker, Han Solo, Boba Fett, Darth Vader and even croaky Emperor Palpatine himself. You don't have to be a Jedi Master to see a future in which this game will be *huge*. **DAN STAPLETON**

DEVELOPER: BioWare
PUBLISHER: LucasArts
ETA: July-Dec 2010

MAFIA II

RELEASED A YEAR AFTER GRAND THEFT AUTO 3, the original *Mafia* could have adopted the same garish, over-the-top gimp-suited antics that turned that anarchic third-person shooter into a cash printing machine—but it didn't. Its take on criminal entrepreneurship—based on mob life in the 1920s and '30s—delivered a far more nuanced story without ever failing to be an entertaining game.

Now 2K Czech aims to create an even bolder masterpiece. Set in the postwar 40s and 50s, *Mafia II* follows the trajectories of Vito Scaletta and Joe Barbaro, two friends who find that their ascendancy within the ranks of the mob means that they're also entangled in the schemes, rivalries and betrayals between three competing crime families, many of which will end in beatings, assassinations, double-crosses and perforating each other's fancy cars with hundreds of bullets. *Mafia* wrapped steel-hearted gunplay and rampant criminality in classy package: We think *Mafia II*'s going to do it, too. **LOGAN DECKER**

DEVELOPER: 2K Czech
PUBLISHER: 2K Games
ETA: Apr-Jun 2010

Counterintuitively, Vito takes cover behind a barrel.

PC EXCLUSIVE

A STARSHIP FOR EVERY CAPTAIN

Based on the dozens of ships in the *Star Trek* canon, each of the ships in this screenshot has a unique configuration. *PC Gamer*'s resident nerds scan and identify their origins.

STAR TREK ONLINE

THESE ARE OUR VOYAGES

THE REAL QUESTION ABOUT STAR TREK ONLINE IS: what the heck took so long? The king of all science fiction television has been around for more than 40 years, amassed a legion of fans from the casual admirer to the comically fanatic, and become inexorably ingrained in popular culture in a way that very few sci-fi universes have. How could there not have been a *Star Trek Online* before 2010?

Our pent-up demand is at long last about to be satisfied. We will live the ultimate nerd fantasy: to design our own ships, recruit our own crews, set our phasers to maximum, plot a course for uncharted space and engage at maximum warp.

As a captain in Starfleet or the Klingon Defense Force embarking on missions that mirror the structure of many *Star Trek* episodes, you'll beam to planets or hostile spacecraft to take on threats face-to-face, but what has us most eager to play is starship combat. More than most MMOs, *STO*'s space battles are about tactics—not just knowing when to use what abilities, but also managing the power distribution between weapons, shields and engines and keeping yourself positioned to hammer the enemy's weakest shields until they buckle.

Your ship is an extension of your character, and *Star Trek Online*'s flexible starship creator does for spaceships what *Champions Online*'s character creator did for masked vigilantes. You can always cruise around the quadrant in a well-known ship like the Galaxy class, but you can also mix-and-match parts to build a distinctive vessel that's recognizable even among a large fleet of player-controlled ships (as seen in this glorious in-game armada shot).

This isn't just one of our most anticipated games of the year; it's a game we've been anticipating since we first became *Star Trek* fans decades ago. **DAN STAPLETON**

DEVELOPER: Cryptic
PUBLISHER: Atari
ETA: February 2, 2010

SABER CLASS VARIANT (*Star Trek: First Contact*)

GALAXY CLASS WITH AMBASSADOR CLASS SAUCER SECTION (*Star Trek: The Next Generation*)

EXCELSIOR CLASS WITH CONSTITUTION CLASS PYLONS (*Star Trek III: The Search for Spock*)

INTREPID CLASS (*Star Trek: Voyager*)

AKIRA CLASS VARIANT (*ST:FC*)

CONSTELLATION CLASS VARIANT (*ST:TNG*)

SOVEREIGN CLASS (*ST:FC*)

PROMETHEUS CLASS (*ST:Voy*)

OLYMPUS CLASS VARIANT (*ST:TNG*)

CHEYENNE CLASS VARIANT (*ST:TNG*)

SABER CLASS (*ST:FC*)

NOVA CLASS (*ST:Voy*)

WWW.PCGAMER.COM

WWW.PCGAMER.COM

WoW: CATACLYSM

THE FALL AND RISE OF AZEROTH

AZEROTH IS ANCIENT IN GAMING YEARS. It's an MMO world built on a foundation of tech and techniques that are in need updating, not simply more content tacked on. Blizzard knows this, and it's boldly summoned a massive dragon named Deathwing that wants to reforge Azeroth in molten fire.

Deathwing is the best possible excuse to shake up older zones within *WoW* and create new worlds and experiences within familiar territory. Lava spikes and tectonic rifts will alter much of the antiquated, unused geography in unpredictable ways, giving players a reason to revisit the zones they frequented for levels 1-50 as *Cataclysm*'s two new player character races: Goblin and Worgen. **EVAN LAHTI**

DEVELOPER: Blizzard
PUBLISHER: Blizzard
ETA: Oct-Dec 2010

MASS EFFECT 2

The threat you face in *Mass Effect 2* comes from within humanity itself. BioWare's story writers are some of the best in the business, and every screenshot we've seen so far points to a much harsher and more demanding narrative than the original.

A DARKER, GRITTIER SPACE OPERA OF MASSIVE PROPORTIONS

IN MASS EFFECT, Commander Shepard was the first human to join the Spectres, a group of elite peacekeeper agents that operate above the law with the authority of the ruling Council. In this considerably darker sequel, Shepard becomes a fugitive operating outside the law, forcing him to team up with, uh, colorful underworld characters like Subject Zero, a former gangster, cultist, tatoo enthusiast, clothing unenthusiast, and all-around homicidal angry lady. **DAN STAPLETON**

DEVELOPER: BioWare
PUBLISHER: EA
ETA: January 26, 2010

Saving the galaxy is dangerous work, and BioWare says that depending on your choices, some or all of your team could end up dead—including Commander Shepard. To make players willing to sacrifice the hero of two enormous games, the payoff is going to have to be huge.

FALLOUT NEW VEGAS

THE ORIGINAL FALLOUT DEVS HIT THE JACKPOT

WHY WERE WE SO EXCITED to hear that the next game in the *Fallout* series would be developed by Obsidian rather than the franchise's current home, Bethesda? Gamer trivia: the original creators of *Fallout: A Post-Nuclear Role-Playing Game* and *Fallout 2* worked at the Interplay-owned Black Isle Studios. When Interplay effectively shut down, many Black Isle employees, including studio head Feargus Urquhart, bailed and founded Obsidian in 2003. Obsidian's resume includes strong RPG games like *Star Wars: Knights of The Old Republic II*, *Neverwinter Nights 2* and the upcoming *Alpha Protocol*. While not all of the brains behind *Fallout* reside at Obsidian, an injection of original Black Isle mojo is outstanding news. If we had to bet on anybody to surpass 2008's incredible *Fallout 3*, it'd be these guys. **DAN STAPLETON**

DEVELOPER: Obsidian
PUBLISHER: Bethesda
ETA: Oct-Dec 2010

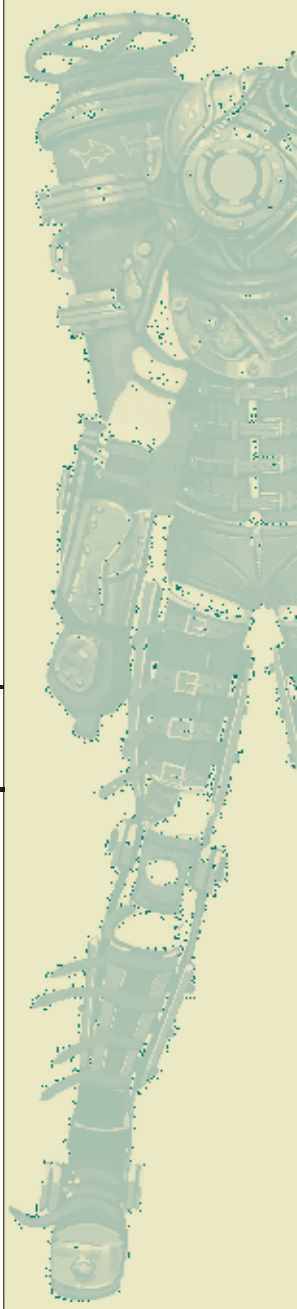
BIOSHOCK 2

THE FALL OF RAPTURE.

Big Sister is coming.

If you need another reason to look forward to *BioShock 2*, then you probably didn't play the original. We recommend you get on that before taking 2K Marin's beautiful, bloody bathysphere ride later this year. **LOGAN DECKER**

DEVELOPER: 2K Marin, 2K Australia, Digital Extremes (multiplayer)
PUBLISHER: 2K Games
ETA: Oct-Dec 2010



ELEMENTAL

DEVELOPER: Stardock
PUBLISHER: Stardock
ETA: 2010

STRATEGY IS PC GAMING'S NATURAL ELEMENT

REMEMBER MASTER OF MAGIC? It was a grand fantasy 4X (eXplore, eXpand, eXploit and eXterminate) strategy game from the days when men were men and PC games were PC games—aka the early 1990s. Stardock remembers those days too, and it's building a successor to *MoM* designed to recapture that glory. And *Elemental* is that much sweeter as a game that can only happen on the PC. **DAN STAPLETON**

YOU'LL BUILD UP YOUR ARMIES in your cities on the world map in traditional turn-based gameplay, then battle it out against your enemies in pausable real-time on the battlefield, rendered in a fantasy storybook art style that makes you feel like you're playing a Tolkien novel.

LOOKING BACK AT ... THE GAMES OF 1910

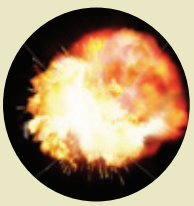
Mustache Lifting

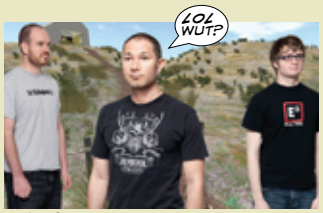
Calling Mr. Satan!

Understanding Darwin

Yeah, We're Doing This For Exercise

LOOKING FORWARD TO ... THE GAMES OF 2110


What Prime Directive?



17th Life

Soylent Green Tycoon

Halo 3 (PC)

PC GAMER

TOP 100 GAMES OF ALL TIME

THE BEST OF THE BEST. THE 100 GAMES YOU MUST PLAY. OUR FAVORITES. THE GREATEST. ¶If our civilization was wiped out—by a lethal virus that compels us to eat each other until there's no one left to eat but ourselves, or by the tiniest of miscalculations by a junior research associate at the Large Hardron Collider—these are the games that we would leave behind for whatever horrific mutated life-forms that were to follow us on this planet. These 100—chosen globally by the staff of *PC Gamer* and *PC Gamer* UK and other PC gaming experts around the world—represent not just the highest of PC gaming culture, but also its variety, its daring, and its pioneering spirit. ¶ Each of our writers was asked to nominate 15 of their favorite games, in order. Their votes were collated, and arranged into the list you find here. Writers were then free to comment on their choices, or those of others. ¶ The results are the essential curriculum for every fan of PC gaming. ¶ And now you can get in on the action, too! We're offering our readers, the chance to produce your own Top 100. To take part, visit ***www.pcgamertop100.com and let us know what's in your Top 100!***

94 DAWN OF WAR II

RELEASE: 2009

SPACE MARINES ARE the finest action figures PC gaming has ever had. *DoW2*'s cover mechanics and loot/leveling create a fine environment for proper paper doll play; picking out what jump pack or power sword to put in their hands. *EL*

The campaign crystallizes smart strategies rarely necessary in normal RTS games and makes them the clear centerpiece of the action. Deathmatch revels in the old-school glory of chaotic armies clashing in a tactical tug-of-war. But it's in the co-op Last Stand mode Relic added after release that I've found my groove. Three heroes, clear tactics, hopeless odds and an expertly judged level-up system—*DoW2* is now a three-pack of brilliant games. ***TF***

***DoW2* has won me over. The basic mechanics; launching Space Marines like artillery into packs of Tyranids, are fun. Leveling up a character and equipping new Wargear scratches a basic stat itch. And even if the multiplayer frustrates me, I can admire the craft of the game—the focused wave of leveling and upgrading that plays out in less than a lunch hour.**

The star, though, is the Last Stand mode. It's that mode, despite being so simple, despite being so cut down, that has hooked me. It is the *DoW2* equivalent of tower defense, and it proves, as ever, that the real-time-strategy game still has places to go, new mechanics to explore. *TE*

100 IL-2
Release: 2001

I know this might sound a little weird, but I got really excited by *IL-2* when I played it for the first time, purely because I could use my Track-IR head-tracking thingy, to glance at the map sewn into my virtual pilot knees, then work out where I am by comparing it to the scenery outside my cockpit. "Turn left at the river, then follow it until the city." *TE*

99 Call of Duty 4
Release: 2007

Big, brash, and questionable in its ethics, it should be an easy game to hate. But it's just so slick, so planned, it demands everlasting, if grudging, respect. Bumping it up to Veteran difficulty and plowing ahead is one of gaming's great trials of strength. *RM*

98 Anchorhead
Release: 1998

Atmospheric and absorbing, but nevertheless a game with puzzles to solve, this is everything that's great about interactive fiction. *TE*

97 Splinter Cell: Chaos Theory
Release: 2005

Every year I opt to change my position on what's remarkable about *Chaos Theory*. Is it the exquisitely designed single-player game or the hilarious co-op? Screw it: both are great. *CP*

96 Jagged Alliance 2
Release: 1999

I love it when a game comes together. Managing your own A-Team of international mercenaries, each with his own specialties and unique personality, makes for some of the best tactical strategy combat this side of *X-COM*. *DS*

95 Far Cry 2
Release: 2008

Take its idiosyncrasies as a given, relegate the incongruous respawning enemies to the back of your mind—and you'll find that there's not much to match the thrill of the best laid plans of mercs and men going awry. Explosively awry! *RM*

93 Audiosurf
Release: 2008

Audiosurf* is pretty much magic—a machine for multiplying the effect of music, working through some alchemy of synaesthesia and extended concentration. It's brought tears to my eyes more than any other game in history. *KG

92 Uplink
Release: 2008

All geeks know that hacking doesn't happen like it does in the movies. *Uplink* made you believe that it does, and put you in the center of it. My argument thus concludes. *LD*

91 Ultima Underworld 2
Release: 1992

One of the most important games ever made, and as inventive with the *Ultima* universe as BioWare were with the *Star Wars* tales. *JW*

90 Rainbow Islands
Release: 1987

Rainbow Island*'s a magical platform game, based around the simplest of urges. Upwards, ever upwards... *KG

Somewhere in my brain, *Rainbow Islands* is always playing. ***GS***

89 Outcast
Release: 1999

It's the closest the PC has ever came to having a *Zelda* of its own—grown organically from the first principles of the PC. *KG*

88 King's Bounty: The Legend
Release: 2008

The best PC-only game of 2008, and yet I know only one other person who played it. I will hunt down and kill those who didn't, with my snake-and-bear-and-zombie-and-fairy-and-mad-dwarf-scientist army. *AM*

87 Grand Theft Auto
Release: 1997

It's incredible how innocent something that was once so controversial now looks. *GTA 3*+ are obviously important, but there's something about *GTA1*'s mechanics-above-all that somehow makes it the more free, more replayable pedestrian murder simulator. *AM*

86 ZangbandTK
Release: 1989

Rogue-derived games are at the root of so much that's brilliant in PC gaming. If you've had enough of the watered-down cocktails you sip in the mainstream, you should head towards the hard-liquor brewed in a bathtub for a real hit. *KG*

85 Tomb Raider II
Release: 1997

It wasn't until the second installment that the series truly hit its stride. The polished engine and controls elevated *Tomb Raider II* from a one-hit wonder (or would that be two?) to an enduring series that still feels exciting today. *LD*

84 Supreme Commander
Release: 2007

It feels like the most "PC" strategy game ever, because we're not just about nerdy stats and squinting at intricate interfaces—we're also about ridiculous ambition, impractical scale and rampant hubris. *Supreme Commander* exemplifies all five of these things, and does it all with epic amphibian robot death-spiders with back-mounted gigalasers of hypergenocide. *TF*

83 Solitaire
Release:2001

What? *TF*

Wut! *Minesweeper* instead, maybe? ***EL***

82 SimCity 2000
Release: 1993

Cities are staggering, beautiful, futuristic things. They're also infuriating. *SimCity* games have always captured the latter, but *2000* is the best at balancing endless frustration with the compulsion to create a more perfect city. It's also the only game in the series to capture a little bit of that futurism, letting you build arcologies and then, given the right conditions, prompt a mass exodus into space. *GS*

81 Gothic 2
Release: 2002

A spiritual successor of sorts to the *Ultima* series, *Gothic II* features a beautifully detailed non-linear 3D world. NPCs live their own lives, complete with independent daily schedules. Mature in rating and content, this is role-playing for adults at its finest. *D*

80 Another World HD
Release: 1991

I felt a sucking chest wound where my heart had been after I finished the game and realized that I'd never again see the friend I'd made or feel as alive as I did when I was in constant danger in this incomprehensible world. Great science fiction and great PC gaming come together in even higher resolution today to break my heart all over again. *LD*

THE PANEL

Who voted for the PC Gamer Top 100
The Top 100 panel is comprised of PC gaming experts from around the world.

Alec Meer (***AM***)
rockpapershotgun.com

Craig Pearson (***CP***)
News Editor, *PCG UK*

Dan Stapleton (***DS***)
Reviews Editor, *PCG*

Evan Lahti (***EL***)
Associate Editor, *PCG*

Graham Smith (***GS***)
Deputy Editor, *PCG UK*

Jim Rossignol (***JR***)
rockpapershotgun.com

John Walker (***JW***)
rockpapershotgun.com

Josh Augustine (***JA***)
Contributing Editor, *PCG*

Kieron Gillen (***KG***)
rockpapershotgun.com

Logan Decker (***LD***)
Editor-in-Chief, *PCG*

Richard Cobbett (***RC***)
Features Editor, *PC Plus*

Richard McCormick (***RM***)
Intern, *PCG UK*

Richard Stanton (***RS***)
Features Editor, *Edge*

Tim Edwards (***TE***)
Editor, *PCG UK*

Tim Stone (***TS***)
Freelancer, *PCG UK*

Tony Ellis (***AE***)
Production Editor, *PCG UK*

Desslock (***D***)
Freelancer, *PCG*

Will Porter (***WP***)
Freelancer, *PCG UK*

79 Tetris Friends
Release: 2008

The best version of that block arranging mini-game, ever! And it's totally free to play at www.tetrisfriends.com. The PC wins. *TE*

78 Star Trek: A Final Unity
Release: 1995

Not everybody agrees that *ST: AFU* was the best *Star Trek* game ever made, but not everybody can be right. Essentially three episodes rolled up into a fourth meta-episode, *A Final Unity* captured the humanistic spirit of the *ST:TNG* series in a fascinating, mysterious and multi-faceted adventure game backed up by the entire *TNG* cast. *LD*

77 Crysis
Release: 2007

Tanks roll across open fields. A jungle is encased in ice. Mountains crack open to reveal alien ships. A nuclear missile is launched. Alien space ships are explored, battled and defeated. A man touches an LCD screen and it makes a tiny ripple. Games so often try to ape the big budget action movies of Jerry Bruckheimer and Roland Emmerich, but *Crysis* is the first to appropriately capture their scale. *GS*

It's still the best-looking game you can play on any platform, but unlike Megan Fox, *Crysis* has more to offer than being easy on the eyes. The devious and brutal AI of the North Korean soldiers force to use the great Nanosuit abilities to their full potential. ***DS***

76 Burnout Paradise
Release: 2009

I don't even like driving games. Sure, the racing's fine, but the smashing stuff! There's so much to smash, and it remembers that you smashed it. It celebrates that you smashed it! It's just non-stop *fun*. *JW*

75 Star Wars: TIE Fighter
Release: 1994

The way in which *TIE Fighter* melded proven space combat game models with the fiction of the *Star Wars* universe was a thing of remarkable balance. Seldom has a *Star Wars* game handled the material this sensitively, and rarely in games does being the bad guy end up feeling so noble. *JR*

Second to being a Jedi, piloting a starfighter between the shield generator globes of an Imperial Star Destroyer to shake a pursuing enemy off your tail is the greatest fantasy to come out of the *Star Wars* films that doesn't involve a metal bikini. Doing it from the Imperial side of things and carrying out the will of the Emperor...well, that's just an unexpected bonus. ***DS***

74 Galactic Civilizations 2
Release: 2008

Managing two hundred billion people is complicated, and *Gal Civ* isn't as simply presented as its Earthly inspiration, *Civilization*. But the scarcity of fertile planets to settle on and the astonishing gall of the alien races competing for them makes it a much more emotional game. You form genuine friends in your attempt to survive in a crowded galaxy, and feel genuine rage at their inevitable betrayal. Artificial intelligence always falters eventually, but these artificial personalities feel real. *TF*

73 Freespace 2
Release: 1999

A better space-sim than *TIE Fighter*? Yeah, it is. Maybe it's because the enemy spaceships are vast, laser-scarred continents. Or maybe it's because its plot is fresh and weird. Or maybe it's because *Freespace*'s space is gorgeous—richly colored starfields that stretch out to infinity. *TE*

72 Cave Story
Release: 2004

The most unassuming game you'll ever see, *Cave Story*'s visuals hide something big clever and better than *Metroid*. A brilliant example of the lock-and-key approach to equipment and exploration, there's also more tragedy and triumph in those little pixels than you'd ever think—getting the good ending is one of my greatest achievements in life. The ultimate indie game, ever. *RS*

71 Battle of Britain 2
Release: 1999

At the heart of *BoB2* is a dynamic campaign engine more sophisticated than most wargames. Factor in superlative flight modeling, authentically massive dogfights, and lively radio chatter and you've got a deeply engaging, endlessly replayable simulation. If you're a solo simmer who can't face the baffling avionics of modern jet fighters, this is a must. *TS*

70 Wolfenstein: Enemy Territory
Release: 2003

It's not all about shooting. The Engineer and his wrench, Mr. Field Ops and his ammo crates, and, holiest of holies, Dr. Medic and his life-giving syringe, all combined to make a team shooter that leans more heavily on the team than the shootering. *RM*

69 Tribes
Release: 1998

Jetpacking around large outdoor maps never gets old. And even if it did, *Tribes* had plenty else going on to keep us interested. The first online shooter that really allowed us to choose how we wanted to play, *Tribes* let us tweak character models and weapon loadouts to play as everything from pure support that heals generators and tosses down turrets to a beefy tank that knocks on the enemy's door without flinching. But *Tribes*' true brilliance wasn't just that you could do these different things, but that it actually mattered when you did. *JA*

Base defense. A gun that shoots exploding Frisbees. Flying troop transports. Remotely-controlled turrets. Learning how to "ski" with a jetpack. *Tribes* was years and years ahead of its time—Dynamix figured out battlefield roles before *Team Fortress Classic* or *Battlefield 1942* did. Even though the maps were vast and the flight was thrilling—if all I did was defend our generator room in my heavy armor with a mortar cannon for an entire match, I had fun. ***EL***

68 No One Lives Forever
Release: 2000

Intrepid, fearless, sophisticated and indisputably foxy, Cate Archer was a PC gaming heroine with Emma Peel's hips, Uma Thurman's lips, and a sly personality all her own. *NOLF* gave us novel, demanding levels and provided us with a suitably powerful and versatile arsenal, and bravely crafted a game that was equal parts shooter, adventure and comedy. *LD*

67 MechCommander
Release: 1998

Diablo* with Mechs, though no one seemed to realize it in '98. It's also (don't lynch me!) a purer expression of what *BattleTech* is (squad-centered tactics, leveling up your pilots, SALVAGE!) than *MechWarrior*. *EL

66 Colonization
Release: 1994

It's from an age when sequels (as this was to *Civilization*) meant thoughtfulness and brave difference, not just doing the same thing with more bells on. Rather than expanding outwards, it expands inwards—turning a small slice of *Civ*'s gigantic scope into something vast, elegant and, unlike most strategy, with an absorbing, meaningful, triumphant narrative. *AM*

65 Carmageddon
Release: 1997

Enjoying the final coup de grace by launching off an overpass onto the hood of an incapacitated opponent brought a deep satisfaction matched only by Olympic victories and sex. *LD*

64 Braid
Release: 2008

The best games always have a few moments that make you think "What the $#&@!?" *Braid* is the only one where those profanities of bafflement were at what *I* just did, not the game. Did I just violate space-time by jumping over a switch? Did I just repeatedly kill myself to headbutt an enemy where I wanted him? Did I just jump off the back of a creature who was, simultaneously, jumping off my own? What the hell did you make me do, *Braid*? *TF*

What at first seems like a simple, self-absorbed tale of loss is subtly interwoven with one of this planet's defining moments of inhumanity. Reflecting on the soul of mankind's existence is an impressive feat for a 2D platformer. ***RM***

63 Beyond Good and Evil
Release: 2003

A global conspiracy. An underground resistance movement. A protagonist who sets out to discover new life instead of destroying familiar

46 STALKER: SHADOW OF CHERNOBYL

RELEASE: 2007

"DON'T JUST STAND THERE, Stalker! Come in! Don't just stand there, Stalker! Come in! Don't just stand there..." Even this joyfully grim FPS' bugs are memorable. The double-whammy of environment and visciousness means the original *STALKER* is endlessly replayable, while industrious modders have it looking better than most of today's games. *AM*

When you get past the sheer ambition of it in a design sense, you also get to see how accomplished it was as a piece of game writing. It dragged in the hard science fiction tradition of the former USSR, as well as the original Stalker concept from Roadside Picnic, and at the same time made careful nods to Tarkovsky's film, *Stalker*. Then they went and set the entire thing in the Chernobyl exclusion zone. It is supremely modern: a pseudo-apocalyptic mash-up of urban decay and supernaturalism that makes no reference to the world outside the zone. It's as much a neat work of fiction as it is an unmatched work of game design. *JR*

Most FPS titles offer a choice of stances; crouch, upright, prone. My time in *STALKER*'s Zone was spent in a constant state of cower. Still the only game in which I've used the standard-issue binoculars, identifying movement and having to make a series of judgment calls—Threat? Harmless? Sketchy?—imbues the bleak and fascinating environment with a powerful tension. *RM*

ones—although she's not above kicking some ass when necessary. Oh, and a pig with jet boots. Where most action-adventure games leave us to adopt the bitter truth of violence as the inevitable—and most entertaining—solution, *Beyond Good and Evil* actually made us enjoy feeling virtuous. *LD*

62 Anachronox
Release: 2001

Your cursor is an upgradeable in-game item that flies around the room—a LifeCursor. Your dead secretary lives inside it. One of your party members is a miniaturized planet you can still visit. Eight years on, I'm still waiting to play another game half as wildly inventive, arty and adventurous as this one. *TE*

61 Street Fighter IV
Release: 2009

As nasty and fast as the blows can be, they're nothing to the desolation of realizing your opponent's just outthought you. A test of muscle coordination and practice, yes, but also a test of guts and smarts. *RS*

60 Planetside
Release: 2003

"Daddy, what did you do in the war?" I was an escort pilot, protecting the swollen dropship flying next to me and its precious, fleshy cargo. I was a mech trooper in a MAX suit, digging in and clearing the skies. I was a tank gunner, taking shots as targets threatened weaker allies. *RM*

59 Space Giraffe
Release: 2008

You won't find a better shooter than this in the rest of your life. Audio and visuals blend into a twitch-prompting shell around the best idea for a little ship anyone's had: you garden as well as annihilate. *RM*

Grr. *EL*

58 Flight Simulator X
Release: 2006

An ample selection of aircraft, and honestly the best compromise struck by the series, or any sim, of being accessible and nuanced—an Xbox 360 controller is actually a workable alternative to a fancy joystick. There are fans who build replica cockpits in their garage just so they can play this game. *That's* PC gaming. *EL*

57 EVE Online
Release: 2003

Spectacular in its ambition, formidable in its challenge, unprecedented in the freedom it offered players; *EVE Online* is probably the most important MMO since *Ultima Online*. No where else in the realm of videogames can a true multiplayer world be said to have been created with this breadth and complexity. *JR*

56 Dungeon Keeper
Release: 1997

The high watermark of management games, and one that should have spurred a vast movement towards making that sadly static genre into something bolder. It's a masterpiece in sound design, and in making something very complicated very simple. Also, chicken-slapping. *AM*

55 Star Control 2
Release: 1990

It combined the space adventuring of *Starflight* (or *Star Trek*) with the simple but addictive combat from *Asteroids*, and populated its open-ended universe with misfit aliens who ranged from genocidal Xenophobes to rude pterodactyls and taught us that Frungy was the sport of kings. *D*

54 Command & Conquer: Red Alert 2
Release: 2000

There's never been an RTS with more character—Westwood seemed to know exactly how far over-the-top to go with their retro-scifi story and unit designs to keep things outlandish and surprising without resorting to the absurd and stupid. *DS*

53 Combat Mission: Beyond Overlord
Release: 2000

Before *CMBO*, PC wargames were dusty, hexagon-littered creatures. Battlefront's dramatic 3D depiction of the liberation of Europe changed all that. The extra D, the tension-fuelling WeGo turn structure, and the resourceful, cautious AI still impress. *TS*

52 Spelunky
Release: 2009

Spelunky's levels are random, so even restarting from the first level is a journey into the unknown. It's a basic and cruelly hard platformer, but its superb procedural generation, completely destroyable levels and hundreds of enticing and powerful secrets have kept me playing it more than any other game this year. *TF*

51 Monkey Island 2
Release: 1991

Still makes me laugh. It's funny without seeming to try and manages to cram so much character into so few pixels. *JC*

Plus, it has Murray, the wannabe demonic talking skull. *JA*

50 Dragon Age: Origins
Release: 2009

Released too late for most people voting to have played it, I wonder where it will appear next year. The finest RPG I've ever played, in a world with so much depth you'd think it had been created a hundred years ago. I've played it for 100 hours, and I know I'll play at least 100 more, and that's just the original content. Hundreds more hours of DLC are planned, and I'll be playing them, too. *JW*

I love the way the replayability put forth by the origins and vats of content removes the pressure to complete every single side quest in *Dragon Age*. If I don't want to help a poor refugee boy find his mom in a random town, I don't have to—maybe I'll hit it on my next playthrough. *EL*

49 Alien Vs Predator
Release: 1999

This is and always will be one of the most atmospheric, ageless and frickin' frightening first-person shooters ever made. *AM*

48 The Longest Journey
Release: 2000

It picked up my imagination and gave it a new shape. Its commentary about reality, the conflict of capitalism and freedom, and the power and importance of your imagination remains topical 10 years later. *JW*

It was a tremendous, epic fantasy grounded by a central character with whom I could immediately relate upon her first utterance as she finds herself on the edge of a precipice dressed only in her underwear: "This is so not appropriate." *LD*

47 Left 4 Dead
Release: 2008

It should be pointed out that the entire *PC Gamer* team, after a year of playing, aside from me, still hasn't worked out that you can keep the Tank from smashing a grounded player to death by punching him in the back. The fact that I'm always the one that risks his neck by taunting the Tank off Craig, to little reward, suggests that the *PC Gamer* team are idiots. And I'm a hero. *TE*

Oh please, I've known that since day one. The only reason I don't do it more is that it's always *me* the Tank's pounding on. The brave adventurer, ready to scout ahead for his party and alert them to forthcoming dangers! And what thanks do I get? "Ooh, Tank! Everyone throw molotovs!" *TF*

45 Operation Flashpoint
Release: 2001

It blew open the doors for open-world games, creates tension like few others and still inspires fanatical devotion and creativity from its community. *JC*

44 Diablo II
Release: 2000

Pure input/output. The gold standard that finger-murdering fast-action RPGs are still compared to almost 10 years later. It satisfied our bloodlust and gearlust natures with its visceral gameplay, not to mention its kick-ass cow level. *EL*

43 Sims 3
Release: 2009

It's a suburban what-if machine. What if I hit on my neighbor? What if I have kids? What if I explore this crypt? The answer to each is usually funny, dramatic and calamitous. *The Sims 3* finally tones down the tedious baby-sitting elements, leaving you free to toy with the soap opera. *GS*

42 Peggle
Release: 2007

The missing link between traditional gamers and the rest of the human race. *AM*

Easy to understand and compulsive even to watch. I've been at parties where half the attendees have ascended upstairs at 11pm, sat on a couch in front of a digital projector, and spent the hours 'till bedtime taking it in turns to play *Peggle*. ***GS***

41 Grim Fandango
Release: 1998

No game—none, anywhere, ever—breathed more life and richness into its characters than *Grim Fandango*. A film noir adventure game set in the Mexican underworld, *GF* introduced us to the lovelorn dead, the greedy dead, the weasely dead, the slick douchebag dead, the beautiful, intelligent and fatalistic dead and a twitchy-eared demon who's handy with cars...and also dead. *LD*

40 Sacrifice
Release: 2000

If Terry Gilliam made an RTS, you suspect it'd be a lot like *Sacrifice*. Warped, hilarious, innovative, brilliant. From some of the best large-scale devastation in games to some of the finest puns ("Bovine Intervention"), this is one of the PC's most precious artifacts. *KG*

39 Day of the Tentacle
Release: 1993

Tim Schafers are rare creatures to be treasured. This remains his very funniest moment, along with some of adventuring's finest puzzles. *JW*

38 Darwinia
Release: 2005

Introversion has been brave and stupid enough to create something with as singular a vision as *Darwinia*. *KG*

Beneath all the charm, the actual game mechanics are inspired, smart and fun. Each level strikes a different balance between simple shooter and grand RTS, and the two feed into each other so satisfyingly. ***TF***

37 Battlefield 2
Release: 2005

For me, the dust-chucking, ear-splitting chaos of *Battlefield 2* is all about squads. It's the best of the tactical play seen in high-level *Counter-Strike*, but set against the thumpingly dramatic context of a much larger war—vicious, terrifying and fought entirely by other players. *TF*

36 Football Manager
Release: 2009

This had six months of my life, literally, and I don't regret it one bit. *RS*

35 Company of Heroes
Release: 2006

Just when the thought of playing yet another World War II game was nearly enough to make me want to do a para-drop sans parachute, along came *CoH* with the most polished visuals, sound and tactical combat I've ever seen in a real-time strategy game. *DS*

34 Unreal Tournament
Release: 1999

Alongside *Quake III*, *UT* still stands up as the pinnacle of FPS deathmatch. Personally I think the maps and weapons in *UT* are better. *JC*

I still fire up a me-against-bots match with Instagib turned on every now and then as a mild anti-depressant. ***EL***

33 Mass Effect
Release: 2008

Flitting around a galaxy in a quadra-powered space-jet shouldn't be underpinned by quite so much science, but *Mass Effect*'s background story, its technology, its tectonic political shifts, are all explained perfectly by a completely believable bucket of lore. Guns have no ammo, just shave off wedges of bullet from a solid block? That... makes sense! Utterly compelling. *RM*

32 Mafia
Release: 2002

It was a methodical, engrossing, painstakingly constructed and illustrated game, and playing it underscored the mature and gritty themes instead of caricaturing them. *LD*

It's a story. Some games have a story, some games allude to one. But *Mafia is* a story. It's one you play, with driving, shooting, racing, missions and midnight walks home. But it's overwhelmingly about your being told a really fantastic and moving story—nothing else has managed this so well in seven years since. ***JW***

31 Frontier: Elite 2
Release: 1993

Still the game that I measure all others against. It seems so simple, yet allows for a breadth of roleplaying, missions and action that still amazes me. I've been a spy, a smuggler, an assassin, a slaver, a military courier, a recon agent. I've flown down into the atmosphere of a planet, photographed a military base, and pulled up and out, all for the Empire! And all in a game that sits on my USB stick. *CP*

30 Homeworld
Release: 1999

Still the best space RTS and the only one to make truly 3D warfare not only work but essential. *JC*

It also has a genuinely emotional story and a beautiful orchestral score that accentuates the feelings of being lost in space and the tension of battle. ***DS***

Holy Picard, *what a soundtrack*! *EL*

29 Max Payne 2
Release: 2003

Max Payne 2* proved that the blackened heart of film noir was inherited by PC gaming after its neglect in Hollywood. It was ruthlessly cynical, gritty and depraved. Some levels (the Funhouse, in particular) served up more hallucinatory images than Payne himself could have worked up in his worst Valkyr-inspired nightmares. *LD

Half Life 2 didn't do physics first, *Max Payne 2* did. Physics! The lovely physics of a man dying off a ledge, landing on a precariously balanced board and twanging a bucket of paint up in the air. Physics, don't ever leave us. ***RM***

28 Bioshock
Release: 2007

Much as I love the flexibility of *BioShock*'s semi-magical combat once it gathers pace, it's the quiet moments that stick with me. Exploring not so much the place—grim and dripping as it is—but the people. I can't think of another game where I've actually cared about what the villain was trying to accomplish. *BioShock*'s is conflicted, sad, captivating—and richly imagined. *TF*

27 Doom II
Release:1994

id not caring about anything other than being pure, flat-out fun is a trick they've only managed to repeat with *Quake III*. *AM*

26 Knights of the Old Republic
Release: 2003

From its opening genocide to its climactic galaxy-changing decisions, *KotOR* is a game of big themes viewed from an extremely personal perspective. While some of the Dark/Light themes have been overplayed since, this was the time they were relevant in a world defined by the Force. *JW*

25 Baldur's Gate
Release: 1998

It was the realization of a dream pen-and-paper role-players have had since the dawn of gaming: to play actual *AD&D* on their PCs, with all its cherished gubbins of THACOs, kobolds and Cure Light Wounds spells. But it was something else as well: the introduction of high production values and rounded, human characters to a genre which, thanks to BioWare, has never looked back since. *TE*

24 Ultima VII—The Black Gate
Release: 1992

Technology finally caught up with the ambition of *Ultima*, to create a huge and highly interactive world where chatty NPCs scurried around opening the curtains. It had an intelligent story, too, about the dangers of surrendering freedom to an ostensibly benevolent but oppressive higher power. *TE*

23 StarCraft
Release: 1998

Beautiful asymmetry. The Terrans, Zerg and Protoss are so different from each other, both visually and mechanically, yet each is intricately balanced against the others that they're still battling for dominance more than a decade later. The staggering possibilities for unique interactions between the diverse units makes the gameplay unpredictable and surprising, and the character that Blizzard conveyed using only 2D sprites and short voice clips and slurping sound effects makes you almost immediately pick a favorite and join the fight on their side. *DS*

10 FALLOUT 3

RELEASE: 2008

BETHESDA MAKES ITS GAMES with refreshingly little regard for what games are supposed to consist of: a series of carefully judged challenges and rewards. Instead they make a place, and expect you to figure out how to survive there. That's especially well suited to the awful wasteland of the *Fallout* series. Leaving the safety of the vault puts you in a nightmare of ash and ruin so boundlessly harrowing that I was earnestly joyful to come across a radio signal, tune in and hear a human voice. *TF*

True that. People assume that making a large world sort of excuses the developer from filling it. *Fallout 3* is huge, but it's exquisitely designed with fascinating little stories all over the wasteland. I'll never forget the cute little community of cannibals I found, or the door that opened to a blank wall with something really nasty written on it. ***CP***

It's the loneliness that hooks you. Trekking the wasteland, you're looking for scraps—not of food, or water, but conversation. Where other games offer incidental discussions, *Fallout 3*'s become entirely vital: chatting to a similarly lonely character sustains me more than any irradiated meat could. These oases of interaction in the bleak, blasted world are as real as the one intrepid explorers may have found in the northern portion of the map. *RM*

Even if Bethesda had otherwise made a fantastic RPG, I would have hated it for calling itself *Fallout* without doing justice to the style of the historic Black Isle games. But *Fallout 3* gets it: it mixes one part dark humor with two parts genuine post-apocalyptic horror, and applies it to a huge world so fully realized and packed with interesting things to do that exploration—not the main story quest—is the best part. ***DS***

It just doesn't seem possible that Bethesda could have had enough man-hours to create all the fascinating things I've found in *Fallout 3*. The only explanation is that they're still writing it, and quietly downloading new quests, towns and bizarre situations to my PC as I wander the wasteland. Wasteland? Hardly. Not a square foot of it is wasted. *TE*

22 Quake III: Arena
Release: 1999

When you excel at *Quake III*, even for one brief frag, you feel as if you've attained some transcendental mental clarity. Every +1 to your K column is a result of juggling fluid, fluctuating math for gravity, rocket trajectories, enemy quad-damage refresh time. In motion, it's an exercise in subtracting health from things that have it as efficiently as one can. ***EL***

21 ArmA II
Release: 2009

For me, *ArmA*'s authentic representation of what it's like to shoot a gun, fly a Harrier or jog endlessly through the Czech Republic isn't so much an experience in military realism, but an excuse for incredible co-op antics with my friends. I've never been so happy to be in a helicopter when it's hit by an anti-air missile, if only because I get to yell "Eject, eject!" very dramatically, mourn the loss of a comrade or two, and then recount it to everyone at work the next day. ***EL***

20 World of Goo
Release: 2008

What I particularly love about *World of Goo* is how regularly and dramatically it changes. New levels aren't just new content for an existing template; 2D Boy switches out or subverts the most important fundamentals of how the game works. ***TF***

It's so phenomenally clever, so consistently inventive and so brilliantly funny. It's the pinnacle of puzzle games. ***JW***

19 Hitman: Blood Money
Release: 2006

Nothing you can do with an assault rifle or grenades will ever be as satisfying as drawing a silenced pistol from your jacket and shooting someone in the back of the head—then getting away with it. By concentrating on social stealth—evading suspicion, rather than detection—Hitman asks you to commit a more heart-pounding deceit than the likes of *Thief*. ***TF***

18 Unreal Tournament 2004
Release: 2004

The comparisons to *Quake III* have become increasingly absurd as this more outlandish series rolls on. By *2004*, it had become primarily a vehicle-heavy, open-air battlefield game about warring over a tactically intertwined network of nodes. It's closer to *Battlefield*, except that the basic shooting is slick, quick and gratifying enough to make a superb deathmatch game. The best of both worlds. ***TF***

17 Portal
Release: 2007

This puzzle game at its heart is mind-expanding, intensely clever and kinetic. But what elevates *Portal* so far beyond that is the queasy mix of menace and comedy from being at the mercy of such a wildly malfunctioning villain. GLaDOS's masterplan is emotionally confused, ill-hidden and even slightly cute—even when she's asking you to die. ***TF***

Portal is another instance of Valve's refusal to leave well enough alone. They already had a brilliant gameplay gimmick that blew minds around the world, but it wasn't complete until they wrote in a character who, despite being little more than a disembodied voice, was so entertaining that we were driven forward as much by a desire to hear what she'd say next as to complete the puzzles. ***DS***

It's as much of an achievement in human psychology as it is in puzzle design. *JW*

16 System Shock 2
Release: 1999

Apart from being a sleek and uncommonly successful mix of action and role-playing, what sticks with me most about *System Shock 2* is how strong that sense of being on a space ship was. When I think back to my time sprinting away from cyborg ninjas and zapping things with a laser pistol, I don't think of it as levels. I picture the entire Von Braun, hulking and boxy, drifting through space while my little horror story played out within its clean metallic decks. ***TF***

15 GTA IV
Release: 2008

Possibly the most convincing depiction of a place in any game ever. Player freedom and great storytelling in perfect harmony. Funny as hell too. ***JC***

14 World of Warcraft
Release: 2005

Wednesday nights are raid nights; loved ones are sent out, curtains are drawn, headsets are donned and I and nine friends take on some of *WoW*'s hardest bosses. The tactics are intricate, the use of our abilities finely planned. *WoW*'s raids are co-op gaming's finest moments—and they're just a tiny part of this massive, absurdly well-drawn world. ***TE***

13 Counter-Strike
Release: 2004

Pitch-perfect clan warfare, demanding tactics, lightning-fast skill and intimate map knowledge, the ultimate test of clan teamwork and communication. Its mass appeal speaks for itself. ***JC***

12 Civ IV
Release: 2006

Civ IV added so many new dimensions to the already vast number of possibilities the previous games offered that it could easily have gone off the rails and become mired in its own bloat. But it didn't—somehow, Firaxis made a game that actually lives up to the claim of letting you reenact thousands of years of civilized history, and they made it impossible to stop playing. ***DS***

11 X-COM: UFO Defense
Release:1994

Attention everyone who didn't vote for *X-COM*: you're dead to me. In fact, I'm going to start it up right now, name a recruit after you, then send you alone and unarmed into an alien base swarming with Chryssalids. There, in the moments before you're stung and reduced to a drooling zombie incubator out of which a fully formed monstrous alien will soon burst, you will experience the suspense that made this one of the greatest PC games of all time. ***DS***

9 Thief II
Release: 2000

There are compelling arguments for the other games, *Thief*'s weirdness, *Thief III*'s stand-out levels. But there's more focus on stealing in *Thief II*, and while I adore the world, the story and characters, I'm in it for the glint. ***CP***

8 Planescape: Torment
Release: 1999

It's a game that's about that most unvideogame-like theme: regrets. And it's regrettable there's been nothing quite like this since. ***KG***

7 Fallout
Release: 1997

Fallout was my introduction to the world of RPGs. It kicks you out of a safe, sheltered life and into a harsh, deadly world full of dark humor, great role-playing choices and memorable locations and characters. ***DS***

6 Oblivion
Release: 2006

Oblivion gives you a massive fantasy world, gorgeously rendered and freely explorable, but it doesn't guide you through it. You get better only at what you do. And since what I did was make myself invisible, I ended up almost useless in combat but brilliant at deception. So my story involved a lot of me vanishing, then burly warriors and angry demons finding themselves pelted by weak but incessant blows they had no way of countering. It was a uniquely entertaining farce, and uniquely mine. ***TF***

5 Rome: Total War
Release: 2004

Perhaps it's something to do with the way in which the ancient era was depicted, or perhaps it's down to the dramatic twist of the factional civil war within the Roman Empire, but this remains the finest of the *Total War* games. Glorious, visionary, elegant. ***JR***

4 Half-Life
Release: 1998

It takes you on a journey and holds your attention completely from start to finish. It's the finest example of gripping narrative through *play* rather than exposition. This is gaming *as* story rather than story *in* games. *JC*

A high watermark in single-player first-person-shooting that no-one has ever managed to reach—including Valve, for my money. It's a true adventure, a glorious sci-fi movie made polygonal flesh and constantly, profoundly inventive. ***AM***

Half-Life* was packed with firsts: the first shooter to surprise me with scripted events, impress me with enemy AI and grip me with a mystery. But it wasn't just about doing things first, it was about doing them right. *DS

3 TEAM FORTRESS 2

RELEASE: 2007

IT'S REMARKABLE ENOUGH that *TF2* can have nine classes and still make them all so different to play. That they all tessellate so satisfyingly, that their tools are expanding over time, and that each new map gives them all a new part to play, is a genuinely incredible accomplishment. The ballsy mendacity of the Spy is still its greatest thrill, but the wild variety of *Team Fortress 2* is what keeps it on my hard drive. *TF*

I like the bit when the Heavy starts singing "Bababababababa." And then a Soldier crits him. And then the Heavy's torso bounces of the walls. That bit's dead funny. ***TE***

253 hours as one class. A hand nearly crippled with RSI. Can someone stop me playing *TF2*, please? I really can't afford to see 2010 slip away as 2009 did, and my doctor kind of asked me to stop. *CP*

TF2 shows just how ridiculous genre delineations are—it's just as much RPG as FPS. Healing that Heavy/rocketing that turret/capping that point is a pure form of role-playing, taking on the mantle of your class as you tailor your efforts and abilities to the immediate tasks at hand. As a case study for community support, as well, it's a truly astounding effort. ***RM***

One underrated bit: the gibs. They're a wonderful reward for well-aimed crits, but dying and seeing "Your liver!" tagged in your freezecam'd moment of death dulls the pain of respawn limbo. *EL*

I never enjoyed *Team Fortress Classic* because its matches were always so chaotic. I could never tell what was going on or what I ought to be doing to help my team. *Team Fortress 2*'s greatest accomplishment is having such disparate classes and yet being so easy to read. I can hop on to a game and very quickly realize that, ooh, my team needs an Engineer. This lets me be useful, feel useful and repeatedly save my team from their inevitable deaths. You're welcome. ***GS***

I'll always see myself as a Pyro; I'll always have a home in the role I'm good at: setting people aflame, deflecting rockets and patrolling for invisible Spies in *TF2*. May it live even longer than *Counter-Strike*. *EL*

2 HALF-LIFE 2

RELEASE: 2004

VALVE'S MASTERFUL SEQUEL was a turning point for the linear first person shooter. It was the game that did everything so right that it diminished the accomplishments of every other contribution to the genre, and it seems to challenge anything that followed to do things differently, or perish. Character, setting, physics, combat, puzzles...it's nothing less than an object lesson in great design. *JR*

And they fudged the timeline of the game by sending Gordon Freeman through "a very slow teleport!" I love that the potentially very serious *Half-Life* universe allows for such silliness. ***CP***

It's troubling that five years later no shooter has come close to *Half-Life 2*, other than it's own sequels. An exquisite shooter, it should have been the model all other developers followed and improved upon. Instead, none even seem to have tried. But then we can always just play *Half-Life 2* again, so there's that. *JW*

Valve's has a knack is for pacing, and what still stands out about *Half-Life 2* after five years of other first-person shooters is the sharp changes of tempo. The one that struck me most this time through was entering the Citadel: you've started a revolution, fought your way through a deafening war, had your life saved by a robot gorilla, and then bang! The passage closes behind you and you're alone in the bowels of the monolithic metal beast, clambering your way quietly up its tube-riddled innards. ***TF***

On its own, the gravity gun was a revolution in physics-based gameplay. Most developers would've created that and then called it a day—but not Valve. They bundled it with the most lifelike characters and one of the most interesting, involved stories ever seen in a shooter. This is one of the very few sequels that managed to reinvent itself to be more than a bigger, more explody version of its predecessor. *DS*

1 DEUS EX

RELEASE:2000

In my latest playthrough, I'm not taking any risks. I don't attack anyone I'm not guaranteed to kill in one hit. I don't brain someone with a crowbar unless they're already choking on tear gas. I don't alert the enemy unless it's to lure them into a proximity mine, and even then I'm invisible by the time they reach it.

Previous runs have avoided direct violence, used only silent weapons, murdered friendlies instead of hostiles, or completed objectives without ever being seen. I make rules for myself, sometimes consciously, sometimes riffing instinctively off how my first few encounters play out. Because *Deus Ex* asks "How do you want to approach this?" often enough that I don't always have an answer off the top of my head.

This weird truncated Latin name pops up every time people talk seriously about what games can be or do. Most of us disciples will tell you it's because of the options: you can evade, hack, shoot, stab, lure, trap, poison, disable or schmooze, and each of these is viable improbably often in its 20-hour tale.

But you get into muddier waters if you ask why it hasn't been surpassed. *Vampire: Bloodlines* has most of those options. *BioShock* has all but two. *Oblivion* all but one. *Deus Ex* doesn't do any of these things very convincingly, but to this day it feels more free-form, creative and full of possibilities than anything else I've played. Why?

Well, what do you not copy, if you set out to make a great new game in the mould of *Deus Ex*? The flaws. And I think it's actually a flaw of *Deus Ex*'s that makes it work so well: half-blind, easily duped AI. No one does that anymore—even bad games cover their modesty with scripting tricks. But you've got a lot more options when you're tackling troops who, even when they do spot a man in a trenchcoat crawling three meters in front of them, aren't sure if it's worth pursuing.

Even if you're not making any effort to hide yourself, *Deus Ex*'s goons are so blind and incredulous that you always have a second to look for cover, turrets, explosives, exits—and a second to make a decision. Without that second, *Deus Ex* would be another game with nice ideas that aren't really practical—not as practical, at least, as firing bullets at people.

Nudge those explosives into the laser tripwire, then back up and shoot it when the guards come running to investigate the alarm. Choke up a room with a gas grenade, then switch on your resistance augmentation and dash through the smoke systematically stabbing everyone. Or put a proximity charge beneath an alarm button, so when the guards run for help they'll destroy both themselves and their means of summoning it.

I was one of the "Escape, Quit" types when I first played: after a few bizarrely sudden deaths, I gave up and wrote it off as hard for all the wrong reasons. It was months later, when the sense that I'd missed something nagged at me, that I went back to it. And in an attempt to even the odds, I rounded a corner and sprayed two guards with a fire extinguisher. As they choked and gagged, I shot each point-blank in the back of the head: instant kills, no risk. I was a convert.

Since then, I've argued every year I've been at *PC Gamer* for *Deus Ex* to top our Top 100. This year, for the first time

I think it's actually a flaw of *Deus Ex*'s that makes it work so well: half-blind, easily duped AI. No one does that anymore.

ever, it has. I don't imagine it'll cause the industry to drop what they're doing and start working on *Deus Ex* clones, but it's good to see its sacred name finally on the throne. *TF*

Laughable combat AI. Flat NPCs. Questionable stealth. Tedious late '90s conspiracy-theory kitchen-sink hotch-potch plot. Greasels. It's a miracle that a game that does so many things so wrong can burn so bright after so long. Because that's what *Deus Ex* is: a miracle. ***KG***

The general consensus is that *Deus Ex* gives the player great freedom. But I'm not on board with that. Every time I've reinstalled it, I found myself doing exactly the same thing, creating the same build, honing the same skills—it's not freedom that brings me back, it's chasing perfection. And I think that's what *Deus Ex* is—damn near perfection. *RM*

While technology may age, brilliance is immortal. Very annoying people criticize this game for its relatively poor combat, or the choppy graphics. Shakespeare written with a poo-based ink on toilet paper is still Shakespeare. It's a truly remarkable, brain-changing creation, with more ideas than all games put together since. ***JW***

It's all in that first mission. You can walk all around the Statue of Liberty and choose your own way in. It's not about choice in the binary sense of either/or, left or right. It's about being part of a big, dynamic gaming machine and changing how it works from within. And then later, the doors open and you're in Hong Kong. *TE*

I've never played it. Any good? ***GS***

WWW.PCGAMER.COM

WWW.PCGAMER.COM

REVIEWS

The Saboteur

Run, jump, shoot, climb, sneak, drive and bomb your way through a raucous, roguish adventure

IF YOU'RE GONNA GO OUT, GO OUT WITH A BANG. Pandemic (R.I.P.—EA closed up the 11-year-old game shop as soon as this game was completed) lived and died by those words, and showed no reluctance to borrow cool elements from *Grand Theft Auto, Assassin's Creed, Hitman, Indiana Jones* and its own *Mercenaries 2* and recombine them into *The Saboteur:* an open-world third-person shooting and driving game that replaces all of that controversial cop-killing with politically correct Nazi-killing. It ambitiously does a lot of things—most of which it accomplishes quite well—and it all gels together into an explosive mixture that's best described as an action-packed romp. And who doesn't enjoy a good romp?

The guy whose backside you stare at throughout *The Saboteur* is Sean Devlin, an Irishman with the mouth of a sailor, the libido of James Bond and the upper-body strength of a paraplegic circus acrobat. Sean's quest for bloody vengeance takes him from a life as a rowdy racecar driver to battling Hitler's goons in occupied Paris in 1940, where his unexplained proficiency with firearms, explosives and his gecko-like ability to scale buildings make him an asset to the underground French resistance movement.

Paris and its surrounding countryside areas are recreated with impressive detail, dotted with recognizable landmarks like the Eiffel Tower, the Louvre and the Arc de Triomphe. In a unique graphical flourish, areas under the boot of the Nazi occupation are drained of most of their color, leaving only a few specific objects and effects—including red swastika armbands, explosions, weapons, interactive items and one very fast racecar—are highlighted in super-saturated color. It's functional, and it just looks cool (although driving at night in black-and-white areas can be tricky). After you complete the main missions in that area—usually by blowing something up—a shockwave sweeps color over the entire neighborhood to symbolize the French resistance movement gaining strength there. Passing between a liberated neighborhood and an occupied one fades the color in and out on the fly, which remains a terrific and subtle effect throughout the game.

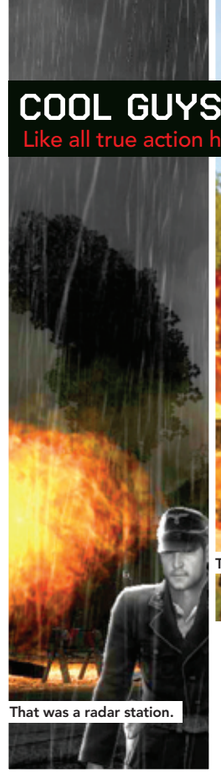
MAD BOMBER

The City of Light is a target-rich environment for a resistance fighter—you can hardly stroll down the cobblestone street without spotting a Nazi sniper tower, search light, idling armor, radar station or gun battery and thinking to yourself "Ooooh, I'd like to blow *that* up!" A detour of destruction ensues. "Free play" bombing jobs are repetitive, sure, but strangely addictive—for most of the game I found myself unable to pass up opportunities as they arose. All of these tempting explodables significantly extend the length of the already substantial game—you can expect around 30 hours of gameplay if you do all of the optional missions and stop to blow up the roses.

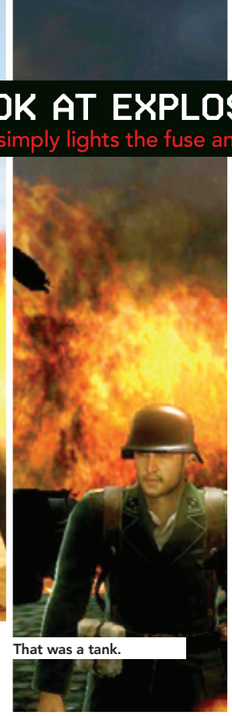
As a shooter, *The Saboteur* is competent, fast-paced and very enjoyable, but it doesn't do a lot to distinguish itself from other open-world games of the *GTA* school. Weapons are all conventional pistols, shotguns, machineguns, sniper rifles and rocket launchers that behave pretty much as expected, while plentiful but dumb and amnesia-prone enemies chase you around when you cause a ruckus. Sean's super-quick recharging health puts you right back in the fight quickly, so you're not at all discouraged from getting cocky and having a good time.

COOL GUYS DON'T LOOK AT EXPLOSIONS

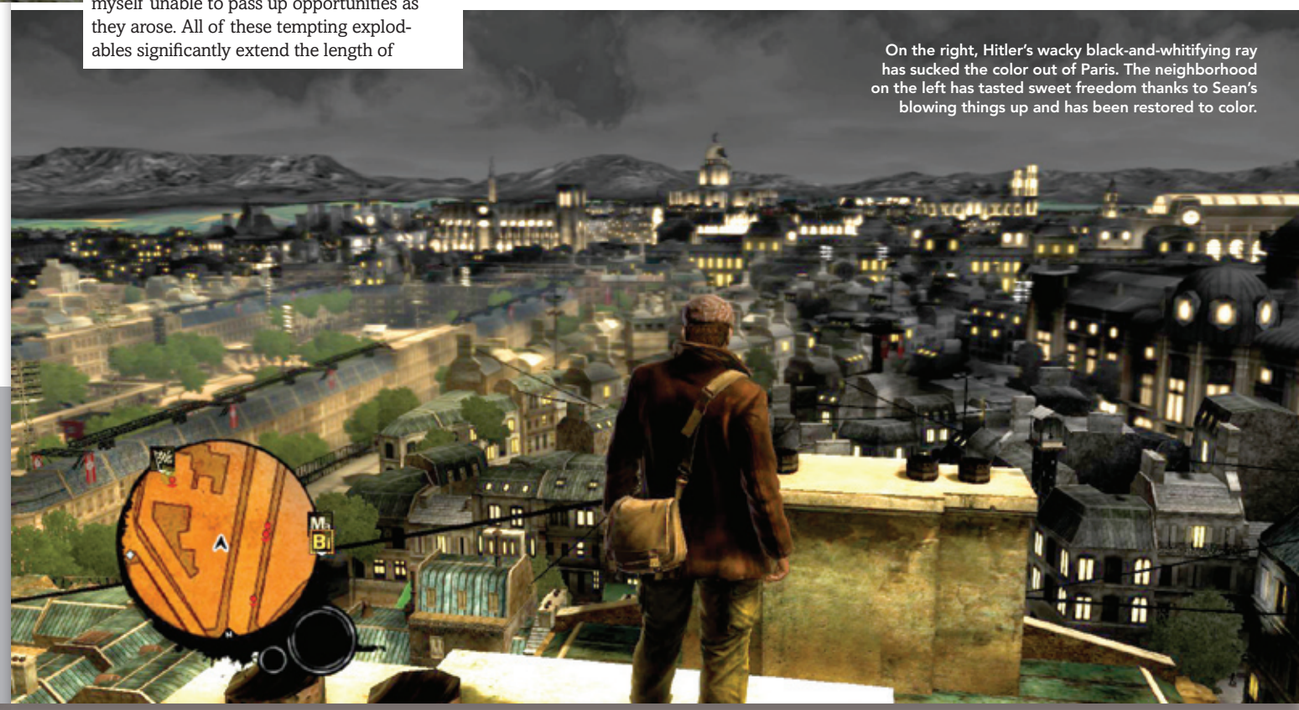
Like all true action heroes, Sean Devlin simply lights the fuse and walks away


That was a radar station.

That was a fuel depot.


That was a tank.

That was a missile launcher.


On the right, Hitler's wacky black-and-whitifying ray has sucked the color out of Paris. The neighborhood on the left has tasted sweet freedom thanks to Sean's blowing things up and has been restored to color.

HOW WE RATE THE GAMES

0–30% INTOLERABLE
A crime against gaming. Whether it's bugs or bad design, this should be shot on sight.

31–45% WEAK
Serious flaws ruin any chance this game has of offering sustained fun.

46–60% MEDIOCRE
A very ordinary game, quickly forgotten. Think twice even if you find it cheap.

61–75% FAIR
A decent effort that, but for a little more polish, coulda been a contender.

76–89% GOOD
Enjoyable, well-made and entertaining—just falling short of true greatness.

90%+ EDITOR'S CHOICE
Oozing class, this is the work of experts at the top of their game. Bravo, sirs!

Race, explosion, explosion, explosion, race, explosion explosion.

"Your clothes—give them to me."

Stealth is slower, more thoughtful, and often more satisfying.

Most of the story missions, which generally task Sean with blowing up a piece of Nazi equipment or taking out a high-ranking German officer or French collaborator, take place in the free-roaming open world, allowing you to pick and choose how you'll approach your targets and in what order to destroy or kill them. But some change the pace and put you into linear levels you have to fight your way through, like fights through the interiors of Nazi facilities or a mad dash through the innards of a burning zeppelin. These come as a welcome dose of gameplay variety, and allow for some more story-driven missions, which is great because despite prevalent heavy French accents the voice acting and writing is generally great—and it's hard not to love Sean's profanity-laced Irish brogue.

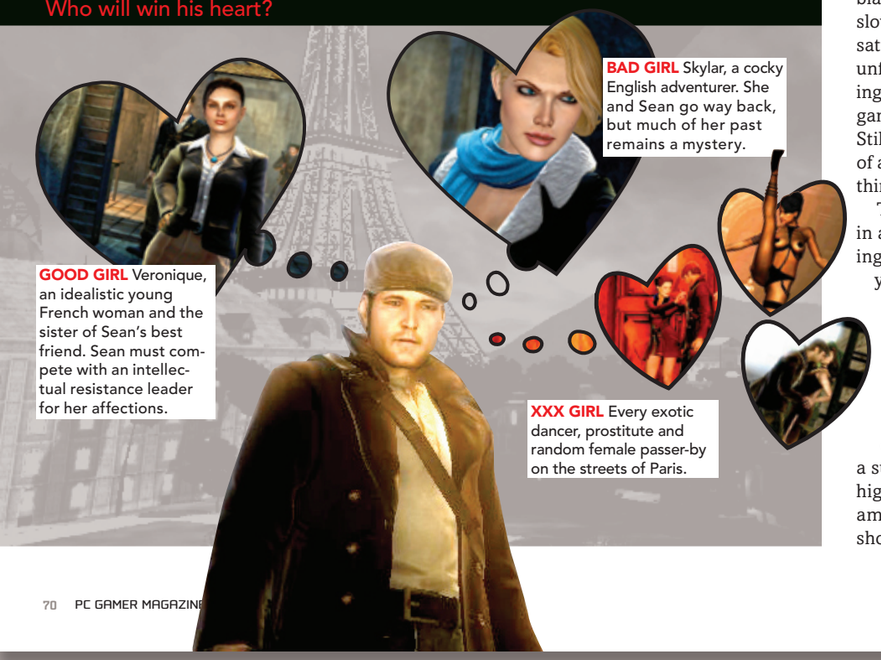
SILENT BUT DEADLY

The Saboteur isn't a strictly run-and-gun game, though. By sneaking up on a Nazi and snapping his neck like last week's baguette, Sean can don an enemy uniform (often in broad daylight in full view of nearby nuns, who don't seem to mind) and use it to stealth his way past most Nazi guards, employing more neck-breaking or silenced weapons to deal with perceptive Gestapo agents. Relative to charging in with guns blazing, the stealthy approach is the slower, more thoughtful and often more satisfying way of reaching your targets; unfortunately the rewards for stealthing it are mostly in your head, since the game rarely recognizes your efforts. Still, it's an alternate, optional means of accomplishing missions that keeps things interesting if you make use of it.

The plot also manages to shoehorn in a few old-timey car races, including one you must win in order to get your bomb-laden car close to the Nazi elites. Driving is extremely arcadey—there's nothing resembling real driving physics or, more disappointingly, any significant damage modeling—and the opponents are not very challenging as long as you have a suitable car. So it's definitely not a highlight of the game, but it is another amusing diversion from the normal shooting and exploding.

SEAN DEVLIN'S LOVE INTERESTS

Who will win his heart?



BAD GIRL Skylar, a cocky English adventurer. She and Sean go way back, but much of her past remains a mystery.

GOOD GIRL Veronique, an idealistic young French woman and the sister of Sean's best friend. Sean must compete with an intellectual resistance leader for her affections.

XXX GIRL Every exotic dancer, prostitute and random female passer-by on the streets of Paris.

IRISH COW BOMB

Because cow tipping is for wusses

Nice tank you've got there, Hans. It'd be a shame if someone were to blow it up.

TWO OUT OF THREE

After two increasingly spectacular and enjoyable first acts, the third feels noticeably less polished in design. The story gets lazier (forcing you to rescue a guy and his daughter—twice), armored super-Nazis are introduced to clumsily toughen up firefights (why are there *always* super-Nazis?), and there aren't nearly enough new items or upgrades introduced in the late game to spend the huge amount of money you amass by completing missions and random acts of destruction. The climactic confrontation between Sean and his jackbooted nemesis is a big letdown as well—you climb all the way to the top of the Eiffel Tower for what amounts to an execution of a defenseless madman rather than a final battle with a formidable opponent. It's still fun, but it lacks the earlier acts' *joie de vivre*. It also stings a bit that there are no multiplayer options, particularly a lack of *Mercenaries*-style co-op play that's especially apparent when you hijack a Nazi motorcycle with an attached machinegun-equipped sidecar that remains conspicuously empty.

But *The Saboteur* more than makes up for these shortcomings with its personality, style, enjoyable action and sheer explodiness. Sean holds his own well enough, and there's no shortage of ways to entertain yourself solo, including catching the full-fledged and elaborately (one might even say lovingly) choreographed burlesque show (with optional pasties for the bizarrely prudish who are offended by nipples and *only* nipples), setting a high score in the drunken knife-throwing game, or the homage to *Duck Hunt* (though I can't believe they didn't have a French poodle dog pop up and giggle at me when I missed). And after *Mercenaries 2*, I was thrilled to find it almost bug-free, with only a couple of insane physics-defying incidents in my many hours of play. Finishing it off and watching the credits roll is a bittersweet moment, as Pandemic's final game is also one of its finest.

DAN STAPLETON

The sight of a zeppelin burning in color against a black-and-white sky is one of the game's coolest effects.

VITALS **WHAT IS IT?** A third-person action game set in Nazi-occupied Paris **RELEASE** Out now **EXPECT TO PAY** $50 **PLAY IT ON** Dual core CPU, 3GB RAM, GeForce 9800GTX/Radeon 4870 **MULTIPLAYER** None **PUBLISHER** EA **DEVELOPER** Pandemic **LINK** pandemicstudios.com/thesaboteur **INFLUENCED BY** *Grand Theft Auto*, *Assassin's Creed*, *Hitman* **ALTERNATIVELY** *Grand Theft Auto IV* (92%) **COPY PROTECTION** Disc check/key code **ESRB** M

FINAL PC GAMER VERDICT

A successful, nearly seamless stitching-together of great features from previous action games bound up in an eye-catching style all its own.

0% BETTER >> 100% **86%**

++ GOOD ++

Questions of taste aside, the controversial "No Russian" level just isn't fun to play.

Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2

Success has gone to Infinity Ward's head, but one very smart addition redeems this year's most-hyped shooter

MODERN WARFARE IS, AT ITS HEART, people being high-tech jerks to each other. Sniping from so far away or such total concealment that their victim has no hope of retaliation; blinding them with magnesium before they even know they're under attack; coming from the angle they least expect and riddling them with bullets before they can so much as turn around.

So in *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2*, exactly as in the first game, you're a jerk to the enemy and they're jerks to you until someone dies. Then the winner ducks behind cover and wait for the bullet wounds to wear off—just like in a real war.

It's fun for a while, but not indefinitely. When *MW2* tries for an atmosphere of explosive pandemonium, it absolutely nails it—but at the expense of any tactical freedom, space to think or choice about where to go.

When it's hard it's worse, as in the Rio de Janeiro slums level. Progress is just a case of memorizing the annoying tricks *MW2* pulls: respawning enemies, invisible barriers over low walls, or shuttered windows bursting open to reveal strangely prescient gunmen.

Because the basic formula doesn't work for any length of time, both *Modern Warfare* games are a sequence of attempts to either enhance it or break it up. *Modern Warfare 1*'s most successful of these, the part I loved, was sniping in a ghille suit in Pripyat. (Stealth jerk.) The silenced rifle and near-invisibility turned it into a more thoughtful game, and one that made my pulse race faster than any hectic war scene. Happily, *Modern Warfare 2* reprises the stealth jerk format for several missions, and each is a treat to play: tense, tactical and satisfying.

MW2's other attempts to introduce variety also work, but less dramatically. There are rudimentary but fun vehicle sequences, manually-steered missiles launched from overhead Predator drones and a heartbeat sensor that gives an *Aliens* feel to hunting tangos.

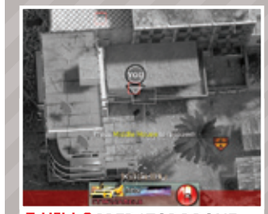
Your cause may be worthy sir, but I have shotguns for hands.

The name's Clone. Bond Clone.

"Where's my furry pencil case? WHERE?"

WHAT JUST HIT ME?

Kill streaks unlock the worst ways to kill me in multiplayer



5 KILLS PREDATOR DRONE
Oh, a remote-control missile fired from a *flying robot*, 10,000 feet in the sky! How sporting of you!

6 KILLS PRECISION AIRSTRIKE
Really? You called down an *airstrike* on my face? You know, there was a time when gentlemen duelled.

7 KILLS ATTACK HELICOPTER
I regret ignoring my hunch that an angry chopper would be waiting if I left the building.

PLAYABLE

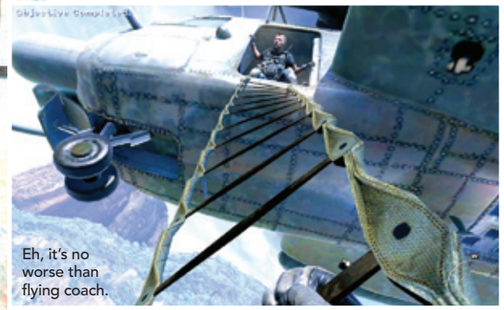
Some introductory moments of new levels are cinematic enough that it takes a moment to realize you're in control. What would normally be a cutscene is playable, although you still can't influence the outcome. Some of these are remarkable—and one sparked a major game ethics row.

In the fourth mission, you're an undercover agent participating in a terrorist massacre of civilians at a Moscow airport. Your CIA orders are not to blow your cover, and your terrorist orders are to mow down civilians, so you're effectively being asked to open fire on the crowd. Depicting the slaughter of so many innocents with such fidelity is on the edge of what's acceptable in the name of entertainment, and asking you to participate firmly tips it over. But that's not the problem—the problem is that it's stupid.

Your actions here are the catalyst for all the carnage and catastrophe that follows in the entire game, which only serves to underline the obvious point: the only reason this massacre happens is the artificial "game over" screen if you shoot the terrorist mastermind. From there the plot only gets more moronic, discarding any "for the greater good" moral weight. In one briefing, the terrorist you're hunting is demonized as someone who thinks nothing of using torture; then, in the very next mission your team interrogates an arms dealer with a pair of jump leads and a car battery.

If this was just a single-player game, it would barely scrape a score of 70 percent. It's saved from the damnation of faint praise by its multiplayer, but perhaps not in the obvious way.

You can duck behind cover and wait for the bullet-wounds to wear off, just like in a real war.



Eh, it's no worse than flying coach.

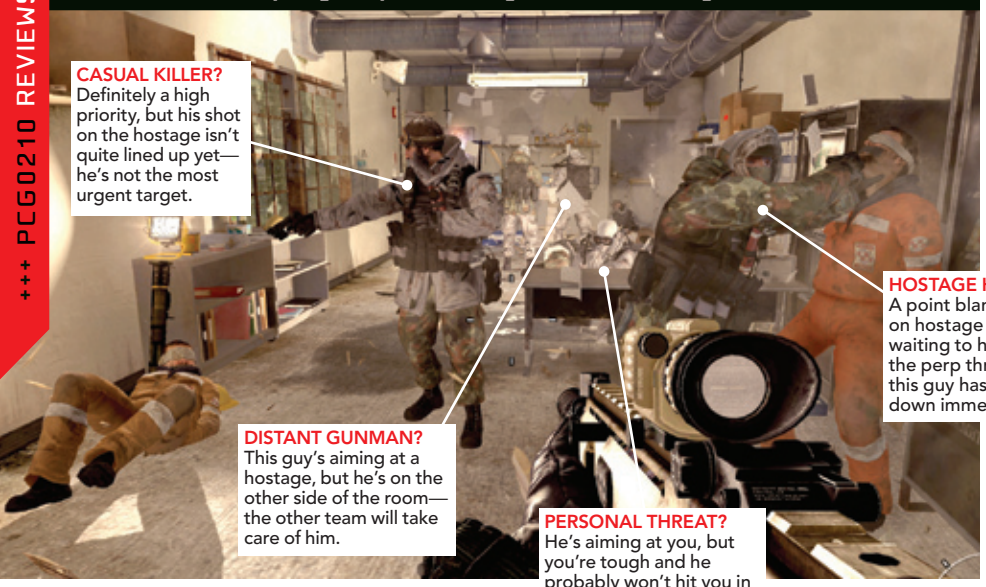
The mainstays of Team Deathmatch, Domination, Headquarters and the like haven't dramatically changed: for all the dozens of new unlockable perks, weapons and pointless titles, it's still a game where you kill people who haven't seen you, then get killed by someone you didn't see. Fun when you win, not when you don't.

The most enjoyable feature—customizable classes bolted together from advantages you've earned by playing—is also what makes it so often exasperating. The best players level up fastest, play the most, get better, do better and are artificially *made* better by the game. It seems to delight in widening the player effectiveness gap.

The final slap in the face is killstreak rewards: granting already unstoppable players game-spoiling deus ex machinas. In one round of Sabotage, a level 70 player had racked up enough kills to call in a nuke, which kills everyone and wins the game. (Thermonuclear jerk.) Who could have predicted that would be unbalanced?

WHO TO SHOOT FIRST?

Slow-mo helps you pick targets in sticky situations



CASUAL KILLER? Definitely a high priority, but his shot on the hostage isn't quite lined up yet—he's not the most urgent target.

DISTANT GUNMAN? This guy's aiming at a hostage, but he's on the other side of the room—the other team will take care of him.

PERSONAL THREAT? He's aiming at you, but you're tough and he probably won't hit you in the head. He can wait.

HOSTAGE HUGGER? A point blank, dead-on hostage headshot waiting to happen: the perp threatening this guy has to go down immediately.

Mr. Terrorist, you're trying to seduce me.

Wait, why are we in Central America? Who cares, just shoot.

HACKED OFF

MW2 doesn't let you choose which server you play on: you just pick a game mode and the game decides where you end up, what map it's playing and who you're with. It's a system that's historically been disastrous, but here, for once, match-making almost works—so long as you count being matched to level 70 racists as "working." Peer-to-peer networking is frankly a terrible system for more than four players. Hacks are already rife, players are powerless to do anything about them, and just under half the games *Modern Warfare 2* dumped me into had latency I would consider unacceptable.

I actually approve of the effort to find a more user-friendly way of getting players into a normal, functioning game, but the offensive part is that they've specifically *excluded* the option for communities to host dedicated servers.

The surprise savior of *Modern Warfare 2* is the mode that gets talked about least: Special Ops. It's a series of 23 disjointed missions that each take place in a single area—some drawn from this or the first game, others entirely new. Right away most of these are better than anything in the campaign, but they get better still—much better—when played in co-op.

Remember the disturbing *Modern Warfare* mission where you tracked targets with thermal optics and pounded them with shells from the safety of an AC-130? Imagine if the friendly you were supporting was an actual friend, who needs you to cover his back against swarmingly unfair odds. Or imagine being that lone trooper on the ground, witnessing first-hand the biblical might of a 105mm round obliterating an entire enemy flank in a single eruption of dust. Both are possible here, and both are every bit as good as they sound.

Modern Warfare 2's convincing weapons, evil enemies, shock-and-awe set-pieces and beautiful-but-unrelated locales suit nothing so well as co-op. It makes *Call of Duty* finally feel special again, and it's the only part of the series since the very first game that I can recommend without reservation. The rest of what you get here is marred by what seem like arrogant decisions, and an unwillingness to change a flawed but commercially proven formula. **TOM FRANCIS**

VITALS **WHAT IS IT?** A faithful sequel to the hardcore military shooter, with the welcome addition of co-op. **RELEASE** Out now **EXPECT TO PAY** $60 **PLAY IT ON** Dual-core CPU, 2GB RAM, GeForce 7800GTX/Radeon X1800, internet connection **MULTIPLAYER** 18-player deathmatch, 2-player co-op **PUBLISHER** Activision **DEVELOPER** Infinity Ward **LINK** modernwarfare2.infinityward.com **INFLUENCED BY** *24*, the works of Michael Bay **ALTERNATIVELY** *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* (91%) **COPY PROTECTION** Steam **ESRB** M

FINAL PC GAMER VERDICT

A struggling campaign and malfunctioning deathmatch are saved by some magnificent co-op missions.

0% BETTER >> 100% **80%**

++ GOOD ++

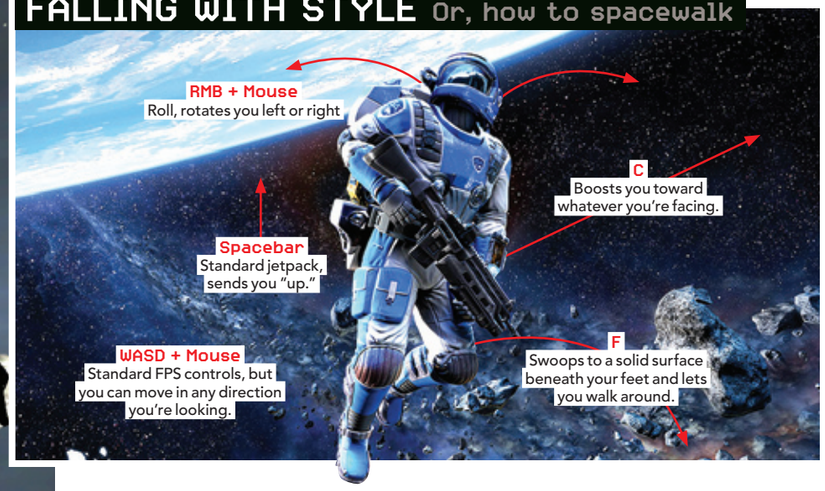
Inside this prison is a rip-off of *The Rock*.

Shattered Horizon

Buzz Aldrin meets Rambo, but gets lost in space

Let's put *these* into orbit.

FALLING WITH STYLE Or, how to spacewalk



SHATTERED HORIZON IS, at the very least, unique in concept: a sci-fi multiplayer shooter where the entire game takes place in zero gravity a couple of hundred miles above the Earth among the detritus of the space program. You're given the freedom to move in any direction, and you fight other astronauts in the remnants of the International Space Station and what remains of the moon.

It's set in the not-too-distant future, so there's an intentional clumsiness to your movement—you certainly won't be charging around at *Quake III* speeds in these thick astronaut suits—but the controls are well thought out (see "Falling with style"), so you'll soon get used to the fact that combat can be initiated from any angle. The combination of a 3D radar and intuitive damage indicators on the HUD ensure you're never left flailing around pumping bullets into the abyss when you're under fire. In a pleasing twist, you can also attach yourself to a surface at any angle and switch to a scoped sniping mode on your rifle (the only weapon in the game)—an option that's rendered useless when you're floating around. But you pay for the increased firepower and accuracy with vastly reduced movement speed while you're anchored.

It's satisfying getting the drop on an enemy from an unconventional angle and watching his lifeless space suit float off into the void, but with the relatively slow pace you're unlikely to be hooting and cackling with joy. And in space, no one can hear you cackle.

This war is waged to settle which way is up.

INTO THE VOID

The main problem with *Shattered Horizon* is that beyond the basic drifting and shooting mechanic, there's not much else to it. There are three modes: standard team deathmatch (called Skirmish here), Battle, which is a *Battlefield*-inspired control point capture mode, and Assault, where players take turns to attack and defend control points.

Organized tactical assaults are less effective in *Shattered Horizon*'s disorientating environments, however, and they play like variations on a theme rather than distinct game types. Each of the four maps can accommodate all of the modes and, as an unfortunate result, matches become sadly similar. The arenas are largely characterless collections of angular floating rocks and "My First Space Base" architecture. The only truly arresting map is based on the International Space Station, which has been bashed into pieces by an asteroid. But even with the Earth hanging behind the conflict, it's strangely lacking the supreme vertigo that battling in freefall over the planet should provoke. Given the relatively high system specs and Futuremark's reputation for making our PCs weep hot silicon tears with its renowned benchmarking software, I was expecting *Shattered Horizon* to be gorgeous, but this rendering of outer space certainly isn't going to be winning the *PC Gamer* Miss Universe award.

Shattered Horizon is diverting, and its zero gravity shoot-outs are not without their charm, but unfortunately, with only four maps on offer it shows its entire hand within the first couple of hours. There's no coherency between matches, the ranking system offers no rewards, and the complete freedom of movement means the various arenas feel more like backdrops to identical action rather than uniquely challenging environments.

Futuremark promises more levels will be released later free of charge, but if they're simply rearrangements of the existing textures and models as three out of the four existing maps are, it's not going to make a whole lot of difference.

Granted, *Shattered Horizon* only costs $20, but with nothing to keep people returning beyond the novelty of weightlessness, this game is likely to shed players quickly. Never has the vast expanse of outer space felt quite so limited. **MIKE CHANNELL**

The only truly arresting map is based on the International Space Station.

Satellite TV 'round the world just went dark.

VITALS **WHAT IS IT?** A mutiplayer-only first-person shooter deathmatch with the gravity turned down. **RELEASE** Out now **EXPECT TO PAY** $20 **PLAY IT ON** Windows 7 or Vista, Dual Core CPU, 2GB RAM, GeForce 8800GTX/Radeon 3870 **MULTIPLAYER** 32 players **PUBLISHER** Futuremark **DEVELOPER** Futuremark Game Studio **LINK** shatteredhorizon.com **INFLUENCED BY** *Descent* **ALTERNATIVELY** *Section 8* (85%) **COPY PROTECTION** Steam **ESRB** T

FINAL PC GAMER VERDICT

Novelty online combat at a tempting price, but *Shattered Horizon* has the longevity of a shooting star burning up in the atmosphere.

0% BETTER >> 100% **62%**

++ FAIR ++

There's a whole minigame where you come up with excuses for your next AA meeting.

Shiny convertibles do not mighty weapons make.

Darkwind

Free online turn-based post-apocalyptic car combat is a wild tactical ride like no other

DARKWIND: WAR ON WHEELS IS the best quasi-real-time, partially browser-based, online, post-apocalyptic turn-based vehicular fighting game I've played.

You have a gang in a persistent online world. You manage their training, vehicles and travelling orders from the *Darkwind* website, one in-game month passing for each real-world week. Then, whenever you've have some (real world) time to spare you fire up the game on your PC and take control of your gang in 3D, turn-based, vehicular contests. That might mean arena battles, races or championships of some kind, or it might mean leaving the relative safety of the towns to battle AI or other players in the wasteland.

The tactical car combat is fiddly at first, but quickly resolves into an interesting and well-executed idea, more closely resembling sea-battles than you might expect. At their simplest, fights are about keeping enemies within the firing arcs of your weapons and maintaining the distance best suited to them, while taking into account where everyone's armor is strongest and weakest. You're also thinking about turning radius and terrain, the different stats and skills of your characters and whether anybody's about to panic.

If you squint, you could be playing *Sim Utah*.

A large variety of weapons keeps it all interesting: machine-guns and rocket launchers joined by mortars, spike-droppers, ramming spikes, lasers, paint sprays, cannons and mines.

Your brave, drug-addled gang members will be killed, permanently, by everything in that list. The brutality of *Darkwind* is the most appealing thing about it. Your team *ages*: at 30 their stats start dropping, at 40 their skills follow. You'll give them nicknames, train them, get attached to them, maybe even unlock specialties such as Engine Tuner or Negotiator, and then they'll die.

You'll buy vehicles, name them, paint them, decide what armor goes where, pick tires, pick from an extraordinary list of weapons and choose where to mount them, then you'll wait for the garage to put together your new Death Car/ambulance/saloon/carrier van, and *then* on its first outing you'll accidentally set fire to it with your Death Sedan's passenger-side flamethrower and it'll explode.

Sometimes your convoy will be carrying goods from one town to another when you're attacked by so many bandits you'll be happy to get out of there with a single vehicle you can use to build yourself back up. On better days you and your friend will win a Death Race, split the winnings and buy flaming oil dispensers.

Darkwind is a gamble, a ride, and gets under your skin quite easily as a result. It's as rickety and jury-rigged as the in-game cars, but it deserves credit for bucking MMO tropes and creating a compelling genre mashup. **QUINTIN SMITH**

VITALS **WHAT IS IT?** An MMO of turn-based car warfare with a dash of death and drugs **RELEASE** Out now **EXPECT TO PAY** Free to play, optional $20/3 month subscription **PLAY IT ON** Anything with a 64MB graphics card, internet connection **MULTIPLAYER** Massively **LINK** dark-wind.com **PUBLISHER** Psychic Software **DEVELOPER** Sam Redfern **INFLUENCED BY** *Carmageddon, EVE Online* **ALTERNATIVELY** *EVE Online* (86%) **COPY PROTECTION** Subscription **ESRB** N/A

FINAL PC GAMER VERDICT

A proud, rickety project that's unlike anything else. Check out the hobbled free-to-play version before diving in.

0% BETTER >> 100% 80%

++ GOOD ++

Tales of Monkey Island: Chapter 4

Guybrush finally faces the music

Stan's coat has that effect on all mammals.

BACK WHEN *TOMI* STARTED, lots of people complained that they wanted the whole thing up front. Why pay for the privilege of waiting a month between plot points? *Chapter 4: The Trial and Execution of Guybrush Threepwood* answers that with that rarest of phenomena—a cliffhanger that works.

It's not the usual To Be Continued ending as, unlike those festering abominations of gaming, we know the conclusion is coming in a month. And it's better than an act break, because the beautiful "Oh my *god*" handed out by the final scene gets time to breathe and grow in our minds. It's episodic gaming done right.

Before that, of course, there's an episode to play, and it's another of the really fun few hours of light adventuring we've come to expect. It's the first of the series to retread old ground, re-using the Flotsam Island sets from the first game, but re-lit and seen in a different context. The eye-rolling at yet another jungle exploration puzzle is mitigated by it being genuinely clever, with the puzzles backed up by the return of Stan and an excellent script. "You fight like girls!" calls Guybrush as his wife Elaine and the fantastic Morgan LeFlay finally have their much anticipated reckoning. "Yeah," snaps Morgan, sticking her sword in his face. "And we KILL like 'em too!"

This episode suffers a little from puzzle bloat, but they're strong puzzles with only a couple of weak moments, and some great story bits make up for the padding. *TOMI* improves on all of Telltale's past adventures in writing, design and just all-over quality. With one episode left, it'll take a voodoo curse to spoil the party now. **RICHARD COBBETT**

VITALS **RELEASE** Out now **EXPECT TO PAY** $35 (for 5 episodes) **PLAY IT ON** 3GHz CPU, 1GB RAM, GeForce 6800/Radeon 9800, internet connection **MULTIPLAYER** None **LINK** telltalegames.com **PUBLISHER** Telltale **DEVELOPER** Telltale **COPY PROTECTION** Online Activation **ESRB** E

FINAL PC GAMER VERDICT

0% BETTER >> 100% 80%

++ GOOD ++

Detective Tapp is *so* over his retainer.

SAW

Would you cut off your leg to save yourself from bordedom?

SAW IS A SURVIVAL HORROR game that is neither a challenge to survive nor horrifying. So right off the bat, it's got problems.

As Detective Tapp, you find yourself kidnapped by the sadistic villain Jigsaw and imprisoned in an asylum. It starts out with a bang, pitting you against a fiendish brain-slicing hat. A couple quicktime events later you are free to roam—and that's where things start to get boring.

Every chapter is capped off by elaborate puzzles, as intricately and insidiously designed as they are in the movies. You'll find yourself losing on purpose just to see traps spring and dispose of victims in creative ways. However, most of these puzzles aren't terribly tricky, and you'll advance without feeling like you earned it.

But between these big puzzles you will be looking for a way to escape by completing smaller, less interesting puzzles and, unfortunately, combat. Melee fighting in the game feels broken—unless you're lucky enough find a revolver, you're stuck spamming the light-punch button and avoiding the heavy punch or melee weapons whose slow animations invite enemies to interrupt your attacks.

While the audio is devastatingly creepy, with the screams and moans of patients reverberating throughout the asylum, the gory, blood-splattered environments are undone by texture popping and repetitive, generic character models.

The exciting start and grisly plot lure you into a devious trap of hours of bland gameplay punctuated by the occassional moment of fun. Jigsaw's games are meant to be cruel, barbaric, horrific and pedantic, but *this* game is just plain tedious. **ERIK BELSAAS**

The enemies aren't terrifying, but the combat is.

VITALS **RELEASE** Out now **EXPECT TO PAY** $50 **PLAY IT ON** Core 2 Duo, 2GB RAM, 512MB GeForce 8800GT/Radeon 4850, internet connnection **MULTIPLAYER** None **PUBLISHER** Konami **DEVELOPER** Zombie **LINK** konami.com/games/saw **COPY PROTECTION** Steam **ESRB** M

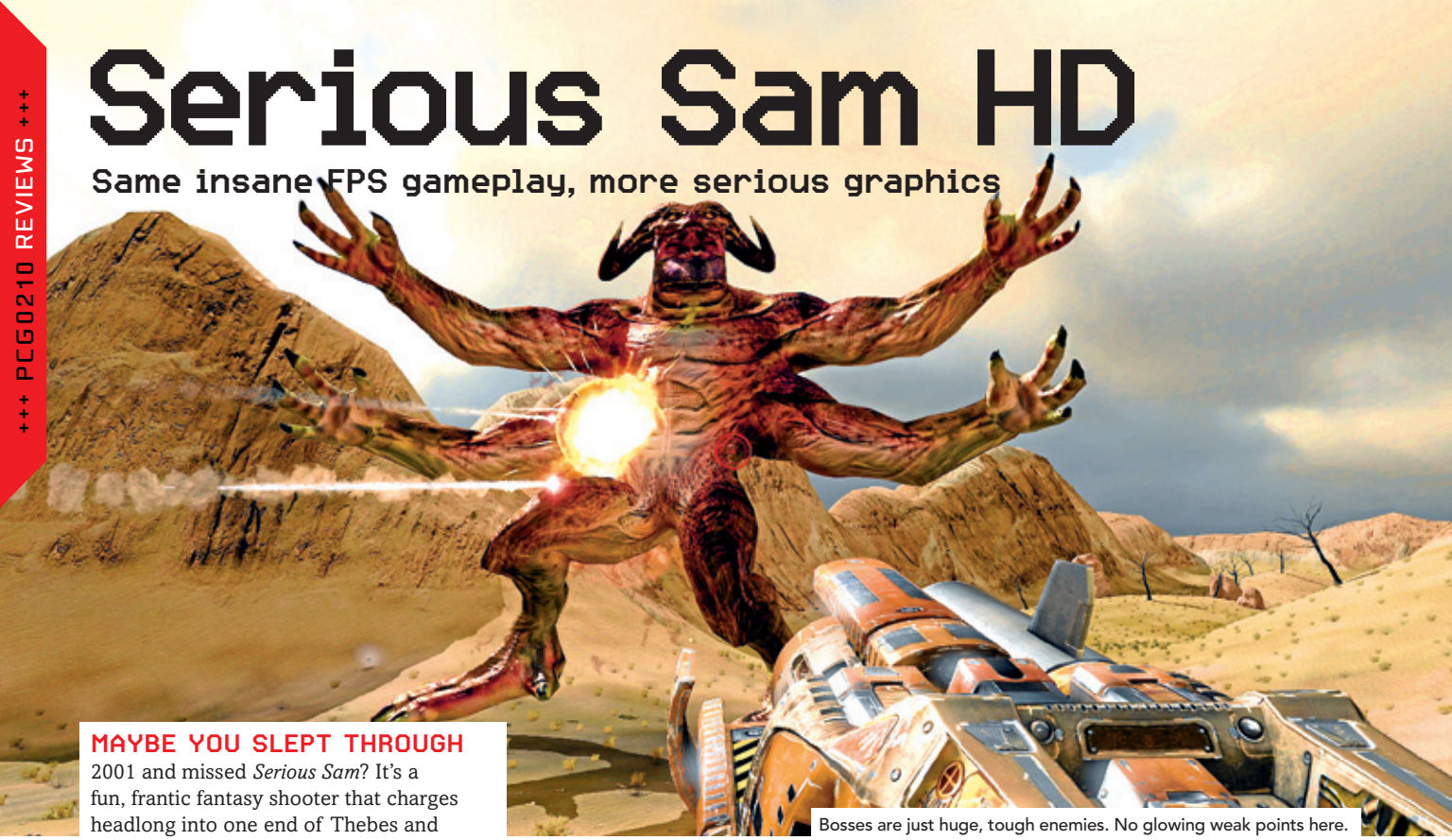
FINAL PC GAMER VERDICT

0% BETTER >> 100% 45%

++ WEAK ++

Serious Sam HD

Same insane FPS gameplay, more serious graphics



Bosses are just huge, tough enemies. No glowing weak points here.

MAYBE YOU SLEPT THROUGH

2001 and missed *Serious Sam*? It's a fun, frantic fantasy shooter that charges headlong into one end of Thebes and comes blasting out the other—into space. *Serious Sam HD* is a straight-up remake that extends levels, shines up graphics and adds physics while sacrificing none of the lunacy—it's still all about gunning down swarming enemies. Harpies that shoot ice, zombies that spray fireballs, swarms of exploding frogs, electric piranhas, bio-mechs that stomp around and shoot rockets and lasers. And then there's the Headless Kamikaze—a roaring, sprinting corpse with two ticking bombs and a personal space problem, who appears in every ensemble of enemies throughout the game.

Sam starts with a pistol, then gets his hands on a minigun and eventually ends up wielding a *cannon*. From a pirate ship. By the end, you're committing Sirian Werebull genocide with it—it's the only thing that can mulch these enormous beasts faster than they appear.

While you never leave this monster-filled Egyptian city, *Serious Sam* finds room for surprising architectural variety—underground rivers, dry canyons, dusty tombs and gardens. Each area is a good size with plenty of room to run and gun, multiple levels of elevation, and no shortage of secret areas.

Noise plays a surprisingly vital role. Every enemy has a distinct cry that you learn to associate with the tactics you'll need. It'll howl or hiss or bellow just before attacking, and "Ooh," you'll grin to yourself, "that sounds like a scorpion with a minigun. Better get my grenade launcher out."

But some 2001-era issues linger on. The story, for one, yanks you out of the action to babble about aligning the four elements. There's also an extremely predictable tendency to spawn a group of enemies as soon as you pick up an item. Also, the swarms in *HD* are a little thinner than we might have hoped for.

Still, everything I loved about the original game is here. *SSHD* is just a touched up portrait of a lesser-known, much-loved ancestor.

JAZ MCDOUGALL

VITALS **WHAT IS IT?** Remade campy shooter with hyperbolic 50-foot tall demons and not much else **RELEASE** Out now **EXPECT TO PAY** $20 **PLAY IT ON** 3GHz CPU, 1GB RAM, GeForce 7600/Radeon X1600, internet connection **MULTIPLAYER** 4 players **PUBLISHER** Devolver Digital/CDV **DEVELOPER** Croteam **LINK** serioussam.com **INFLUENCED BY** *Doom* **ALTERNATIVELY** *Painkiller* (84%) **COPY PROTECTION** Steam **ESRB** M

FINAL PC GAMER VERDICT

A cheerful makeover of a fun but mindless shooter that preserves the classic charm without introducing anyhing new.

0% BETTER >> 100% **76%**

++ GOOD ++

Indecency! You can see that car's undercarriage.

Furry dice: a must-have for any proper rally driver.

AWESOMELY AWESOME I have a skull with googly eyes on my dashboard.

VERY AWESOME My portacabin fills with absurd souvenirs from places I've raced in.

AWESOME Dave Mirra thinks I'm a legend, and Katie Justice calls me "Spanky."

PRETTY AWESOME I win races even though I keep killing myself.

FAIRLY AWESOME My car's horn sounds like an ice cream truck.

THE AWESOMETER

How awesome does *DiRT 2* want you to feel?

DiRT 2

Not much of a racing simulator, but an excellent party simulator

IT MIGHT BE THE LATEST PROGENY of the traditionally unflinching and serious *Colin McRae* series of rally games, but *DiRT 2* has had an attitude upgrade. It makes me think and speak in phrases like "I'm all in Dave Mirra's ass" with its breathlessly excited voiceovers and constant affirmations as to how extreme everything is and how amazing I am.

By all rights, the cacophony of irony-free "extremes," "insanes" and "awesomes" *DiRT 2* throws around should be exhausting, even grating. *DiRT 1*'s ultra-cheesy narrator Travis Pastrana turned a lot of people off the game, yet *DiRT 2* builds on it, accompanying him with a whole raft of cheerily banal celebrity racers to replace the late McRae, such as BMX legend Dave Mirra (whose ass I'm all up in). It should be *hideous*. That it's not—and that it's often pleasing—is a clear sign of how well put-together, designed and presented *DiRT 2* is.

There's an engaging do-it-your-own-way ethos that extends throughout. If you feel a particular affinity for a certain car, you can stick with it, adding to it as you play to follow you to whatever type of race you choose. Very early on, I found the Pontiac Solstice was a natural fit for my fairly reckless driving style. It's got great acceleration and can turn on a dime, but is twitchy like a kitten during a Fourth of July fireworks show. So I dragged it across the world and up the tiers, dressing it in an array of agreeably garish liveries that I unlocked as the game wore on.

DiRT 2's shiny skin is hung around a skeleton of experience points; you'll nab some for every race you take part in, and more if you win. You level up with agreeable rapidity, which opens up new races across a range global locations—China, Morocco, Malaysia, London, Japan, Croatia—several of which are truly gosh-wow pretty. The almost science-fictional juxtaposition of lush forests and humongous oil pipelines on the Croatia tracks is mesmerizing, while the Utah course is a thrilling tour through John Wayne landscapes at deadly speeds. It fills these locations with 100-or-so races, straddling five key disciplines and a few more gimmicky modes.

PICK 'N' MIX

You'll enjoy some and find others grueling, but you get your pick. Almost nothing is mandatory for progression, unlike the first *Dirt*, which eventually painted you into a corner if you couldn't get your head around every discipline. Here, you just do what you want to do, because *DiRT 2* wants you to be happy.

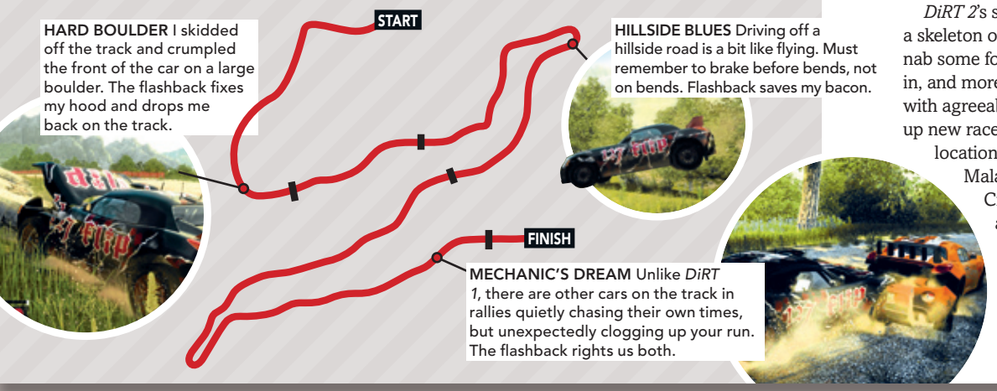
Multiplayer mode, for the most part, replicates the vast choice of the solo campaign. It's via Games For Windows Live, alas, so brace yourself for all manner of connection problems, but it's a whole lot of fun. It deftly lets you pick whichever flavor of race you've acquired a taste for and give it a shot online against real players, not transparent ghosts of players past.

The trade-off for *DiRT 2*'s great flexibility and forgiveness is that it's a much less technical racer than *DiRT 1*, which was already pretty relaxed compared to the pure *McRae* games that preceded it. *DiRT 2* is more akin to *GRID*, making flashiness a priority and retaining the controversial but—in my mind—nothing short of wonderful flashback instant replay/undo feature that can save you from replaying an entire race to fix one costly mistake. These and other changes make *DiRT 2* a more accessible, all-out entertaining game. As with *GRID*, the simheads won't be happy about the various compromises made. Well, their loss is everyone else's gain.

This isn't to say it's been dumbed-down or too easy. There are a half dozen difficulty settings and a bunch of optional manual car tweaks, so it can be made as punishing as you want it to be. However, the fact that your car is auto-fixed between races, in-race damage doesn't generally have the debilitating effect you might expect and that there are no adverse weather conditions means it's taken a few definite steps away from the pursuit of realism.

So, *McRae*-tagged it may be, but *DiRT 2* isn't really a rally game. It has thrown off the stern shackles of the sport it theoretically represents, determined instead to turn racing into one giant party—and everyone's invited. **ALEC MEER**

HAVING FLASHBACKS Undoing my errors on Croatia's bendy Chapel Run



HARD BOULDER I skidded off the track and crumpled the front of the car on a large boulder. The flashback fixes my hood and drops me back on the track.

HILLSIDE BLUES Driving off a hillside road is a bit like flying. Must remember to brake before bends, not on bends. Flashback saves my bacon.

MECHANIC'S DREAM Unlike *DiRT 1*, there are other cars on the track in rallies quietly chasing their own times, but unexpectedly clogging up your run. The flashback rights us both.

An occasional NPC growl when you hit 'em is the only negativity in the entire game.

VITALS **WHAT IS IT?** An off-road racing game with a glut of different modes **RELEASE** Out now **EXPECT TO PAY** $40 **PLAY IT ON** 3GHz dual core CPU, 2GB RAM, GeForce 8800GT/Radeon 4850 **MULTIPLAYER** 8 players **LINK** dirt2game.com **PUBLISHER** Codemasters **DEVELOPER** Codemasters Racing Studio **INFLUENCED BY** *Tony Hawk's Pro Skater* **ALTERNATIVELY** *TrackMania United Forever* (82%) **COPY PROTECTION** Key code/disc check **ESRB** T

FINAL PC GAMER VERDICT

This ain't no sim, but it's a supremely confident and exhilarating good time, to be played exactly how *you* want to play it.

0% BETTER >> 100% **88%**

++ GOOD ++

James Cameron's AVATAR: THE GAME

A clumsy movie tie-in that leaves gamers feeling blue

IT TOOK JAMES CAMERON 10 years after *Titanic* to make *Avatar*—couldn't Ubisoft have spent a little more time on the tie-in prequel game?

Having played it, I still don't have the faintest idea what it's about, and I have little desire to see the film. This sagging cloud of awfulness fails to present a single coherent idea in a world packed with sanctimony and exploding plants.

What must be said in its favor is how pretty it is. The jungles are richly detailed, with some remarkable views of cascading waterfalls, impossible floating islands and rich foliage. But that's all I've got.

You join forces with either the tech-heavy genocidal humans or the victimized, tree-loving Na'vi. Either way, missions mostly involve running towards a yellow blob on the open world map of the planet Pandora, perhaps picking some flowers or switching on some machines

Unfortunately, the Na'vi age badly. Keith Richards badly.

This sagging cloud of awfulness fails to present a single coherent idea.

when you get there. Along the way you'll have to engage in clumsy combat with the horrendously animated enemies gliding and skidding about, compete with the ludicrous targeting system and die remarkably quickly and often. Your character is inexplicably set a third of the way across the screen on the left. *You* can see your enemy clearly in the target, but for your character an obstacle on the left of screen may be in the way. It's beyond words that a game could be so stupid.

There are vehicles and fauna to transport you quickly, but they're such a pain to control that it's often easier to run. The dialogue (occasionally voiced by bored-sounding actors from the movie) merely dispenses clichés. The patronizing "noble savage" portrayal of the Na'vi is delivered in each voice actor's best "indigenous" accent, these aliens apparently being Native American, African, Indian...you know, any of the foreign-sounding ones. Often the writing descends into the bemusingly stupid. "Dormant?" says my character. "I guess that means it's dead." Um. Oh, and they couldn't be bothered to re-record swathes of NPC dialogue if you're playing a girl. "Get him!" indeed.

There's little to recommend. Bad combat, horrible vehicles/animals, a miserably boring missions—yup, it's a game based on a film. **JOHN WALKER**

Speaking of avatars, why is mine over on the right like that?

Semi-naked butterfly-riding—sadly, not as fun as it sounds.

VITALS **WHAT IS IT?** Third-person open-world action based on the *Smurfs In Space* movie **RELEASE** Out now **EXPECT TO PAY** $50 **PLAY IT ON** 3GHz CPU, 2GB RAM, GeForce 8800GT/Radeon 4850 **MULTIPLAYER** 16 players **PUBLISHER** Ubisoft **DEVELOPER** Ubisoft **LINK** avatargame.us.ubi.com **INFLUENCED BY** Giant piles of money **ALTERNATIVELY** *Red Faction: Guerrilla* (88%) **COPY PROTECTION** Key code/disc check **ESRB** T

FINAL PC GAMER VERDICT

A remarkably poor attempt at an open-world action game, clumsily realized in pretty much every possible way besides the graphics.

0% BETTER >> 100% **42%**

++ WEAK ++

ESRB rated H for Hexual Situations.

King's Bounty: Armored Princess

Hit-and-miss new features can't stop the great strategy insanity

Eagle + Lion = world of pain. Tremble.

SOMEWHERE IN BETWEEN the final boss assaulting your princess's home castle, receiving a pet dragon, gaining command of an army, getting your own ship, entering a new dimension, disobeying your father and destroying a priceless artifact, you might wonder if *Armored Princess* is squeezing too much into its first 90 seconds. Is this really a hex-based strategy game?

It is. It tends to be overwrought, but in the most wonderful, lunatic way. Controlling the princess on a quest to save her kingdom is incredibly rewarding because of the giddy speed at which she progresses in her hexagonal jaunt. Experience and gold are always pouring in, along with skill runes for advancement along three separate trees. On top of this, new levels and abilities for your dragon are dumped on you at an extraordinary rate, along with a mass of loot to equip and discard.

Thanks to the sense of humor, the surprises, the relentless, tense fights and colorful world of *King's Bounty* that rewards every inch of exploration, *AP* is as enjoyable at the 20-hour mark as it is five hours in. But as for what's actually been added besides the new campaign – between 25 and 35 hours' worth—there's not a great deal.

The appearance of lizardmen means a nice handful of fresh units to fight and recruit, and the new super-bosses—hulking creatures that demand special tactics—do a great job of shaking things up. But while the pet baby dragon gives the player one more side of their character to develop, his cutesy doughiness and irritatingly slow animations are at odds with the rest of the world. The armor-bearers that replace *King Bounty*'s wives and children aren't half as fun, either.

But for fans of *King's Bounty*, these issues don't ruin anything. If you're not a fan, buy the original, become a fan, *then* buy this. **QUINTIN SMITH**

VITALS **RELEASE** Out now **EXPECT TO PAY** $40 **PLAY IT ON** 2.6GHz CPU, 1GB RAM,GeForce 7800GT/Radeon X1800 **MULTIPLAYER** None **LINK** kings-bounty.com/eng **PUBLISHER** 1C **DEVELOPER** Katauri Interactive **COPY PROTECTION** None **ESRB** T

FINAL PC GAMER VERDICT

0% BETTER >> 100% **86%**

++ GOOD ++

Return of the *Left 4 Dead*

Revive *L4D* co-op, survival and single-player with 10 terrific *L4D* community maps

ZOEY WANTS YOU BACK. *Left 4 Dead 2* may have katanas, Louisiana and gasoline-based game modes, but there are pools of community-created content still thriving on Valve's original undead slayer. With skull-shattering glee, we've hand-picked a variety of survival and campaign add-ons that bring the thrill of the your first match back to *Left 4 Dead*. Better yet, dragging files into a single folder is the extent of the installation you'll need to do to get this stuff running. Have at it!

INSTALLATION INSTRUCTIONS

1) Download mods (we'd politely recommend **www.l4dmaps.com**)

2) Pull up your **C:\Program Files (x86)\Steam\steamapps\common\left 4 dead\left4dead**addons directory (where your Steam folder is located may depend on your operating system)

3) Drag downloaded .vpk game files directly into the **left4dead\addons** folder. They don't need to be in separated.

4) To run a community-created map, select the game mode you'd like to play from *Left 4 Dead*'s main menu, and find the "Add on campaign..." selection from "Campaign."

!f you're still having trouble, you can manually run any map (or individual chapter) by opening the developer console (hit ~) and typing **map mapname** (enter the name of your map in place of "mapname").

Key to Symbols

TYPE OF MAP

- Campaign
- Versus
- Survival
- Other

FEATURES

- Custom Audio
- Great Finale
- Puzzles
- Detailed Environments
- Cinematic
- Americana
- Lengthy
- Funny
- Challenging
- Epic

1. Dead Before Dawn

WHAT IT IS: A masterpiece.

OUR TAKE: *Dead Before Dawn* isn't simply a rendering of the Crossroads Mall from 2004's best undead film, *Dawn of the Dead*. In fact, the mod's familiar setting is quickly enlivened by some wildly ambitious, surprisingly creative scripting and story structure. Two stand-out elements set it apart. In one, a mall security guard guides you through Crossroads' stores and overrun facilities from his position at the closed-circuit camera displays. In another, survivors must protect an entrance without allowing more than a particular number of zombies to cross the threshold; hanging over the entrance is a billboard counting up to the mall's 1,000,000th visitor—if enough undead (or survivors) wander through the doors, a cascade of fireworks will fly off the roof and attract every zombie from here to Michigan.

AUTHOR: Darth_Brush, Stephan Botha

SETTING: Crossroads Mall

LANDMARKS: A grueling air conditioning repair, security rooms, dozens of storefronts.

GET IT: tinyurl.com/l4ddbd

2. Coal'd Blood

WHAT IT IS: Six (hundred) feet under.

OUR TAKE: An abandoned coal mine doesn't seem like the best basis for a different take on *L4D*'s narrow level design, but *Coal'd Blood* has verticality in spades; heaps of wide tunnels and multi-tiered rock terraces. It's subtle, but the rocky ceilings grant immersion—you feel enclosed in a space that's simultaneously contained and open. Crescendos and finales employ underground heavy machinery, like a crane-lifted steel beam you raise to bridge a gap.

AUTHOR: Arinak

SETTING: Cavernous mines!

LANDMARKS: Abandoned bed and breakfast; giant elevator.

GET IT: tinyurl.com/l4dcldb

3. Dismember The Alamo

WHAT IT IS: A replica of a real-life Texas movie theater, the Alamo Drafthouse.

OUR TAKE: *Dismember* was created for attendees of an annual zombie film festival hosted at the theater that the mod is modeled on. Zombie film aficionados will love how this context seeps through—the theater is dotted with real-life film posters and stills. But the raw ambiance of killing undead in a theater environment stands well on its own; though you won't find any tactically-placed turrets in the theater lobby, it's amazing how the feel of ugly cinema carpet, rows of empty seats or a popcorn machine sparks a livelier, lighter gameplay session. The start trigger for survival is perfect parody: a short reel of instructions to moviegoers about what to do during a zombie outbreak.

AUTHOR: ZapWizard

SETTING: Cinema

LANDMARKS: Kitchen, bathrooms, multiple theaters.

GET IT: tinyurl.com/l4ddtal

4. Hunter Training

WHAT IT IS: *Portal* for zombies.

OUR TAKE: The Hunter is L4D's parkouriest zombie, and this is his boot camp. *Hunter Training* teaches advanced leaping techniques (curving, Kai jumping, corner jumping) and tactics on more than 20 courses. The map assembles a variety pack of challenges, segmented into individual rooms (which, smartly, you can skip past if you get stuck). But more than being an obstacle course, there's a sense of empowerment that you achieve after a few (very patient) hours with *Hunter Training*. We'd dare to call it *Portal*-like, and not just for the mono-colored walls.

AUTHOR: Eyeonus

SETTING: Indoor/sterile

LANDMARKS: "Live fire" course; pole-hopping stage.

GET IT: tinyurl.com/l4dht

WWW.PCGAMER.COM WWW.PCGAMER.COM

5. Shadow Moses

WHAT IT IS: The beginning of *Metal Gear Solid*, remade.

OUR TAKE: Though only the first area of the mod has been completed, enthusiastic fans of Konami's stealth-action thriller will froth with nostalgia to relive it in the Source engine. None of the story aspects of *Metal Gear* are conveyed in voice-over or custom characters, but the sheer commitment to recreating nuances of the Alaskan base where the game takes place is impressive—the helipad, air ducts, interrogation room and even Meryl's prison cell are all intact. Anyone that missed out on *Metal Gear* can skip it—we had to channel our distant memories of the game to remember which wall to toss a propane tank (a stand-in for C4) against to blow a hole in it—but this is a prime example of how versatile Valve's developer kit tools can be.

AUTHOR: Gabe Gonzalez

SETTING: Arctic/industrial

LANDMARKS: Helipad; loading dock; bunker.

GET IT: tinyurl.com/l4dsmo

6. Helm's Deep

WHAT IT IS: *Lord of the Rings*' famousest castle siege, ported into zombieland.

OUR TAKE: Zombies want to eat Gandalf. Don't just sit there! Grab an M-16 from the armory, hurl some gasoline cans over the wall's edge (pretend you're shooting flaming arrows, if you'd like), man a gatling gun and defend mankind's last bastion in Middle-Earth. Helm's Deep has made cameos in *Counter-Strike* and *Unreal Tournament* mods; this version is wonderfully vast and detailed. When you think about it, there aren't many moments in *Left 4 Dead* where a scoped weapon is of much help. *Helm's Deep* is ripe with sniping points; struggling to thin squads of undead hundreds of yards away so you'll have a more manageable pack of zombies in your teeth when they climb the wall is wonderfully intense.

AUTHOR: Team Chivalry, SeriouS_Samurai

SETTING: Indoor/outdoor, battlements

LANDMARKS: Every concrete contour of *Helm's Deep*, from its torch-lit innards and curved ramp to the secret culvert that the Uruk-hai exposed to breach the wall in Tolkien's fiction.

GET IT: tinyurl.com/l4dhelm

7. Death Aboard

WHAT IT IS: Boats, lighthouses, prisons! A watery grave.

OUR TAKE: *Death Aboard* has the best setpieces of any campaign we've played—Valve-created or not. The level design wizardry on display aboard the mod's fourth-chapter boat is tremendous: pipes spout steam, crooked cargo containers lay ajar, broken areas of the ship give way to other decks—everything feels precise and purposeful. But the greater aspect is the ship's disorienting perspective: it's tilted in the water, which angles the floor. Every step inside the hull feels unsure and dangerous, and it's a refreshing shift from from *L4D*'s flat planes. The final escape is just as good—you climb an ocean cliff to reach a lighthouse spire, trigger the radio to initiate the finale, then descend precariously back down to be rescued by the unlikeliest of saviors: a vacant hot air balloon.

AUTHOR: Petter "Diputs" Hesse

SETTING: Indoor/outdoor

LANDMARKS: Prison, half-sunken cargo ship.

GET IT: tinyurl.com/l4ddab

8. Ilogic City

WHAT IT IS: A quick hit of trippy nonsense sprinkled with zombies.

OUR TAKE: I'm climbing up the sidewalk while clips of recorded random, indecipherable Spanish loop in the background. There are cardboard cutouts of T-Rexes. At one point, I climb garbage cans as a ladder. At least one puzzle leaves me in an inescapable pit. But this insanity is a welcome change from the heaps of other mods that simply rearrange *L4D*'s urban and rural art assets. *Ilogic* dares to be ridiculous, and it's the closest *Left 4 Dead* gets to feeling like *Garry's Mod*.

AUTHOR: Skarmentus

SETTING: Urban

LANDMARKS: An upside-down living room; a graveyard dense with neon mist.

GET IT: tinyurl.com/l4dilog

9. Vienna Calling

WHAT IT IS: A marathon-length campaign.

OUR TAKE: It took us three damn hours to get through *Vienna Calling*. On Advanced. And that's bizarre, because it's a campaign that keeps almost every *Left 4 Dead* standard in-tact: elevators, sewers, highways, and a smorgasboard of ruined urbanity. *Vienna* is a great starter campaign because it applies these familiar elements while dropping in a few surprises: a traincar that pulls survivors down the track once they're inside and a tense crescendo that involves a river, a farm tractor and some pulleys.

AUTHOR: 44V Mapping

SETTING: Outdoor

LANDMARKS: Clothing store, airport, trainyard.

GET IT: tinyurl.com/l4dviec

10. Bedrooms3: Bite Size

WHAT IT IS: *Honey, I Shrunk The Survivors!*

OUR TAKE: There's something inexplicably gratifying about firing an assault rifle in a giant kitchen. The de_rats-style maps of *Counter-Strike* taught us this years ago, and *Bedrooms3* lets us revisit those same feelings of domestic anarchy writ small. Undead tumble down giant stairs, sprint between lettered wood blocks in the hall, and...oh God—there's a Boomer on your pillow! Domestic life is the perfect antidote for the harsh, weathered aesthetic of the stock *L4D* campaigns—an undead apocalypse doesn't seem so intimidating when it's ankle-high to a blender.

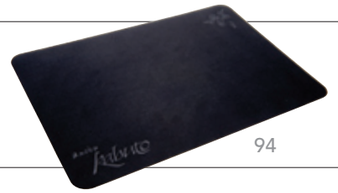
AUTHOR: Kid Ying

SETTING: Indoors/outdoors

LANDMARKS: A wooden play structure buried in jungle-like blades of grass; closable giant doors; a giant Nintendo Wii that, when powered on, unleashes the undead horde.

GET IT: tinyurl.com/l4dbedr3

HARD STUFF
WITH LOGAN DECKER



Controllapalooza 2!

All hands on deck: The Hard Stuff puts this season's crop of mice and joysticks to the test! BY LOGAN DECKER, ERIK BELSAAS AND JOSH AUGUSTINE

THE ONLY THING YOU want to come between you and your games is the perfect controller. The good news is that if you're searching for your palm's soulmate this year you've got more options to choose from than ever before—the tricky part is finding the one for you. Lucky for you, we strapped on our flak jackets and field tested the contenders to make sure that you spend your time playing your favorite games, not the guessing games.

Razer Abyssus
Less than the best

While the super light-weight, ambidextrous Abyssus tracks just as well as other mice in the Razer stable, it sheds most of their high-end features in favor of a lower price. You get three buttons and a scroll wheel—that's it. That may be all you need, but it didn't take me long to start missing those thumb buttons, and adjustable DPI and response time toggles do me no good tucked underneath the mouse. It's a light, accurate and nimble mouse, but better suited for the entry-level poseur than the entry-level gamer.

VERDICT: 74%
$50, www.razerzone.com

Razer Orochi
Catch a feisty field mouse

This is one badass mouse for roving gamers. The ambidextrous Orochi is extremely comfortable, if a little heavy in the rump (which houses two AA batteries) and includes seven programmable buttons. We've yet to exhaust the battery life (rated to last one to three months per pair of batteries), but in emergencies you can pop in the braided Micro USB cable and keep mousing. Awesome portability *and* accuracy—the best of both wonderful worlds.

VERDICT: 89%
$80, www.razerzone.com

Logitech Gaming Mouse G500
The mouse with the most

PC GAMER EDITORS' CHOICE

Logitech just keeps adding the awesome to its mice the way some delis just keep piling on the roast beef. The G500, a direct descendant of the excellent but fugly G5, delivers a deadly accurate laser in a chassis designed for bigger hands and a heavier touch than the G9x (93%). So, unless you're a fingertip mouser, you've got a serious gaming mouse with conveniently placed adjustment buttons that'll take you from 200 to 5700 DPI in three steps, triple thumb buttons and a fantastic weight system. Oh, and our favorite extra: an unlockable scroll wheel that, in addition to the standard notched scrolling, also allows the wheel to be spun freely with a single button press—on *top* of the mouse—for fast zooms or quick dashes down a long web page.

VERDICT: 95%
$70, www.logitech.com

BEAT 'EM WITH A 'STICK

Saitek Cyborg X
This 'stick beats the carrot

PC GAMER EDITORS' CHOICE

The Cyborg X Flight Stick from Saitek is proof that after all these years, it's still possible to build a better joystick. There are two throttles, 11 thoughtfully arranged buttons, and even a small (but sluggish) scrollwheel that you can manipulate with the base of your thumb. But the best part is customizability: six points can be adjusted to suit your grip, from the height and tilt of the crown to the angle of the stick itself. The only thing lacking here is a force feedback motor. Beyond question, this is the best joystick in its price range.

VERDICT: 91%
$50, www.saitekusa.com

Saitek Aviator
How the other side flies

For the same low price as the terrific Cyborg X Flight Stick, you can have a sucky experience with the Aviator! It's an Xbox 360 flight stick that can also be used on the PC, but we don't know why you'd want to as it offers almost no button or function customization except for a homely profile switch located on the base. This leads to gameplay problems unless you are playing a supported title; older games, for example, may be impossible to play as the throttle is identified as the same axis as joystick twist, and the trigger is identified as an axis of its own. Blech.

VERDICT: 32%
$50, www.saitekusa.com

Mad Catz Modern Warfare 2 Sniper Mouse
A little surprise in this plus-size

Game-branded peripherals usually merit extreme caution, so the quality of the *Modern Warfare 2* Sniper Mouse from Mad Catz took me by surprise. It's accurate and versatile, with on-the-fly DPI changing in four steps from 800 to 3200 as well as a braided cable and swappable weights and feet. We're less thrilled by the rocker-switch thumb buttons, and the mouse appears to have been proportioned to fit gamers around the size of the Yeti. With a thick middle and a high rise in the rear, it's show-up-on-Google Earth big. Good thing it has camo.

VERDICT: 82%
$50, www.madcatz.com

Saitek Cyborg V.3
If it only had a brain

A double helping of sadface to the Cyborg V.3, which seems like the kind of thing that would be swapped in place of a pro mouse at the last minute by the opposition at a LAN party. The buttons are ridiculously mushy, the body is slippery, and there's virtually no heft at all to the chassis. Yes, there are three programmable thumb buttons, a comfortable scroll wheel and on-the-fly DPI adjustments (three steps, up to 3200 DPI), but these aren't much consolation when you have to deal with jittery cursors and crosshairs. Don't do this to yourself, or your team.

VERDICT: 39%
$30, www.saitekusa.com

Razer Naga
17 buttons are better than nada

PC GAMER EDITORS' CHOICE

That's right, 17 buttons. Top *that*. Twelve of them are arranged in a 4 x 3 grid where your thumb rests, and are assignable to the number bar or numeric pad of your keyboard via a switch on the bottom. It's initially intimidating, but the gently curved arrangement makes confidently and accurately nailing the right buttons easy to master in less than an hour. The weight and proportions of the chassis are *juuust right*, and custom-made, optional action bar addons for popular MMOs such as *World of Warcraft* are available on Razer's website, making the transition to this just-about-perfect MMO mouse even easier.

VERDICT: 94%
$80, www.razerzone.com

Pad-O-Matic

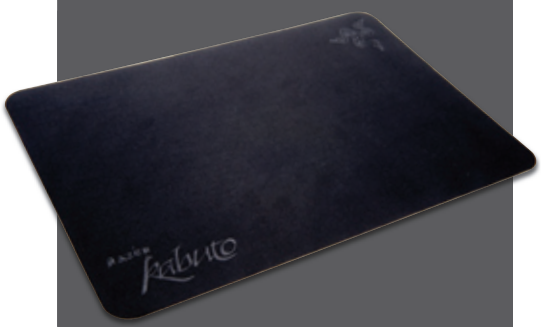
Choose your surface wisely

EXPENSIVE GAMING mousepads are like gold-plated toilets: while you definitely need a basic version, dropping a lot of cash on an expensive model won't necessarily buy you an advantage. Case in point: a direct comparison of two "pro" mousepads by Razer (with the Logitech G500 mouse as my test driver).

Razer Megasoma

Like a succulent beluga whale steak, the Megasoma is huge, white and expensive. In fact, my mouse seemed *less* responsive when sliding over the Megasoma, and the cursor jittered even when I wasn't using the mouse. After a while I found my hand irritated by the rubber surface, which measures a broad 13.7 x 9.1 inches—a lot of precious desktop real estate to give up. At half a Benji, you'd be much better off putting the money towards a better mouse.

VERDICT: 32%
$50, www.razerzone.com



Razer Kabuto

The Kabuto, on the other hand, is more portable, more practical and more effective. Measuring 11 x 7.7 inches when laid flat, the Kabuto can be rolled up to about the size of a highlighter for transport (it's actually thin enough to keep inside your closed laptop). The bottom is rubberized enough to stick wherever I tossed it, and the microfiber top is extremely comfortable and tracks well without giving me hives. It's a fine partner to the Razer Orochi.

VERDICT: 87%
$20, www.razerzone.com

Q&A: Mother-$%#&! Motherboards

Q: In the past two years I've cracked one motherboard and managed to get a second one running for two seconds before it fried itself. Both times the stores I bought them from were nice enough to let me exchange them for new ones, but now I'm terrified of handling them. I follow the instructions to the letter, so what am I doing wrong? **BRIAN R.**

A: You may not be doing anything wrong, Brian. It may just be that you got two bad motherboards in a row, and bravo that the places you bought them from were good enough to let you exchange them. But motherboard installation guides are not known for their colorful, consumer-friendly designs, and unclear instructions can lead to disaster.

I have a few suggestions for you in the future. First, when you install the motherboard standoffs, make certain that you install *only* the necessary standoffs in the correct locations as indicated in the instructions and *no more*. One extra standoff beneath the motherboard can short the entire board out. Second, do not tighten the screws when you begin screwing the motherboard down onto the standoffs. Instead, just lightly tighten each screw until you've got a screw in each standoff, and then go back and gently tighten each one, using two passes if necessary, so that the board is tightened flatly and evenly. Treat your motherboard well, and it will serve you like the greatest and most faithful NPC sidekick you'll ever know.

Easy does it, Tiger.

HARD STUFF TRINITY

DREAM SYSTEM		MID-RANGE		ENTRY-LEVEL	
CASE AND PSU		CASE AND PSU		CASE AND PSU	
COOLER MASTER COSMOS; 850W PSU	$423	NZXT ALPHA; OCZ GAMEXSTREAM 700W PSU	$175	GENERIC CASE; CORSAIR 450W PSU	$161
PROCESSOR		PROCESSOR		PROCESSOR	
INTEL CORE i7-950 3.06GHZ	$555	INTEL CORE I7-920 2.66GHZ	$270	AMD ATHLON X2 6000+ 3.0GHZ	$60
MOTHERBOARD		MOTHERBOARD		MOTHERBOARD	
ASUS P6T DELUXE V2	$379	ASUS P6T	$231	ASUS M3A76-CM	$68
MEMORY		MEMORY		MEMORY	
CORSAIR 6GB DDR3-1600	$180	CORSAIR 6GB DDR3-1333	$165	CORSAIR 2GB DDR2-800	$55
OPTICAL DRIVE		OPTICAL DRIVE		OPTICAL DRIVE	
LG GGC-H20L BLU-RAY	$110	LG GH22NP20	$31	SONY DDU1681S	$26
HARD DRIVE		HARD DRIVE		HARD DRIVE	
INTEL X25-M 80GB SSD; WD 500GB 7200RPM	$339	WD 500GB 7200RPM	$50	WD 250GB 7200RPM	$38
SOUNDCARD		SOUNDCARD		SOUNDCARD	
CREATIVE LABS X-FI TITANIUM	$97	ONBOARD	$0	ONBOARD	$0
VIDEOCARD		VIDEOCARD		VIDEOCARD	
RADEON HD 5870 (2)	$814	RADEON HD 5870	$407	GEFORCE GT 220	$69
	$2,897		$1,329		$477

9 RIDICULOUS CONSOLE MODS FOR *L4D2*

Spawn undead racecar drivers, fight zombies with laughter!

VALVE'S SOURCE ENGINE GAMES ARE FAMOUS for their tweakability, and *Left 4 Dead 2's* zombie AI, chainsaws, and physics effects make this game the best playground yet for modders. Keep in mind, however, that these commands won't work unless you're hosting your own game or have the ability to unlock cheats on a server.

GETTING STARTED

1) Go to *Options - Keyboard/Mouse* from the game's main menu, and click on *Enable Developer Console* to allow access to the console.

2) Hit ~ to open the console.

3) Type **map c1m1_hotel** (meaning: campaign one, map one—every map has a specific extension) to make a local game within that map.

4) Once the game loads, enter these golden codes:

sv_cheats 1 (enables use of all the delightful commands that follow)

god 1 (invincibility; or, if you're feeling more specific...)

buddha 1 (you'll take damage, but won't die)

nb_delete_all
Effect: Single-player *L4D2*. Remember those kind survivors that accompany you from saferoom to saferoom? You just deleted them from the game. Good luck!

bind q (or a key of your choice) **"z_spawn witch"**
Effect: On-demand Witches. Any type of special infected can be spawned this way.

cl_drawhud 0
hidehud 4
z_health 20000
Effect: Super-duper realism mode. No crosshair, no HUD, and the last command increases zombie health four hundredfold--in most cases, only a melee weapon or headshot will down a zed. Aim for the head!

sb_crouch 1
sb_open_fire 1
Effect: Forces all bots to crouch *and* fire their weapons constantly. Reenact any number of war films this way.
map c1m4_atrium

z_forcezombiemodelname common_male_jimmy
z_forcezombiemodel 1
z_spawn
Effect: Remember Jimmy Gibbs, the famous racecar driver and childhood idol of player character Ellis? We've got some bad news.

bind mouse1 "vocalize playerhelp"
(or **"playerlaugh"** or **"playerspotpills"**)
Effect: A glorious practical joke. Do this when a buddy's away from his PC—any of these commands rebind the left mouse button to a voice-over line–they'll click furiously to fire and hear only laughter.

bind 1 "give chainsaw"
bind 2 "give pistol_magnum"
bind 3 "give shotgun_spas"
bind 4 "give smg"
bind 5 "give grenadelauncher"
bind 6 "give gascan"
bind 7 "give pipe_bomb"
bind r "give ammo"
Effect: *DOOM*-ifies *L4D2*. Fill in a different BFG, if you'd like.

g_debug_ragdoll_visualize 1
r_drawopaqueworld 0
Effect: If Coach or Ellis ever decided to drop acid as a pick-me-up during the zombie apocalypse, this is what it'd look like.

z_common_limit 800
z_mob_spawn_min_size 300
director_force_panic_event
Effect: Raises the cap on how many zombies the director can spawn, then unleashes a massive horde (of 300). The higher the number, the lower your framerate will go.

Witches Gone Wild.

PC GAMER

EDITORIAL
EDITOR IN CHIEF **Logan Decker**
REVIEWS EDITOR **Dan Stapleton**
ASSOCIATE EDITOR **Evan Lahti**
CONTRIBUTING EDITOR **Josh Augustine**
INTERNS **Erik Belsaas, Prentice Gede**
CONTRIBUTORS **Mike Channell, Richard Cobbett, Desslock, Tom Francis, Kieron Gillen, Richard McCormick, Jaz McDougall, Alex Meer, Craig Pearson, Will Porter, Graham Smith, Quintin Smith, Richard Stanton, Tim Stone, John Walker**
PRODUCER **Debra Guilfoyle**
BEST MOVIE OF 2009 **The Brothers Bloom**

ART
LEAD DESIGNER **Dan Fitzpatrick**
CONTRIBUTING DESIGNER **Shelley Szudera**
PHOTOGRAPHERS **Mark Madeo, Samantha Berg, Leah Christian**

BUSINESS
GROUP PUBLISHER **Kelley Corten**
kcorten@futureus.com
ASSOCIATE PUBLISHER **Kristen Salvatore**
ksalvatore@futureus.com
SENIOR DIRECTOR NATIONAL ADVERTISING **Rachelle Considine**
650-238-2505, rconsidine@futureus.com
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR INTEGRATED SALES **Nathan Hunt**
415-269-5408, nhunt@futureus.com
REGIONAL SALES DIRECTOR **Isaac Ugay**
949-305-0767, iugay@futureus.com
REGIONAL SALES DIRECTOR **Carol Gillard**
949-305-0767, iugay@futureus.com
REGIONAL SALES MANAGER **Rachel Campos**
650-745-9207, rcampos@futureus.com
ACCOUNT MANAGER **Arthur St. Germain**
650-238-2571, astgermain@futureus.com
DETROIT CONSUMER MANAGER **Alan Dickinson**
248-792-2408, alandmedia@comcast.net
SENIOR MARKETING MANAGER **Andrea Recio-Ang**
650-238-2548, arecio-ang@futureus.com
MARKETING COORDINATOR **Allyson Kardel**
akardel@futureus.com
ADVERTISING COORDINATOR **Jose Urrutia**
jurrutia@futureus.com

PRODUCTION
PRODUCTION DIRECTOR **Richie Lesovoy**
PRODUCTION COORDINATOR **Dan Mallory**
PRINT ORDER COORDINATOR **Linh Chau-Ward**

CONSUMER MARKETING
DIRECTOR CONSUMER MARKETING **Rich McCarthy**
CIRCULATION MANAGER **Stephanie Blake**
NEWSSTAND DIRECTOR **Bill Shewey**
CONSUMER MARKETING OPERATIONS DIRECTOR **Lisa Radler**
RENEWAL AND BILLING MANAGER **Mike Hill**
BUSINESS MANAGER **Elliot Kiger**
SR. ONLINE CONSUMER MARKETING MANAGER **Jennifer Trinkner**
CUSTOMER SERVICE MANAGER **Mike Frassica**

FUTURE US, INC.
4000 Shoreline Court, Suite 400, South San Francisco, CA 94080
www.futureus.com
PRESIDENT **John Marcom**
VICE PRESIDENT/CFO **John Sutton**
VICE PRESIDENT INTERNET DEVELOPMENT **Tyson Daugherty**
EDITORIAL DIRECTOR GAMES GROUP **Stephen Pierce**
EDITORIAL DIRECTOR MUSIC **Brad Tolinski**
EDITORIAL DIRECTOR TECH **Jon Phillips**
GENERAL COUNSEL **Charlotte Falla**
HUMAN RESOURCES DIRECTOR **Nancy DuBois**

Future MEDIA WITH PASSION

Future US, Inc. is part of Future plc. Future plc produces carefully targeted special-interest magazines for people who share a passion. We aim to satisfy that passion by creating titles offering value for money, reliable information, and smart buying advice, and which are a pleasure to read. Today we publish more than 100 magazines in the United States, UK, France, and Italy. Over 100 international editions of our magazines are also published in 31 other countries across the world. The Future plc is a public company quoted on the London Stock Exchange (symbol: FUTR). We are gathered here to mourn the loss of our friend Gronk. Gronk was more than a Half-Orc. He was a barbarian, a damage sponge, a fearless tank and our friend. Why Gronk had to pull that lever, unleashing a torrential downpour of live piranhas upon him, we will never know. Why, after killing a majority of the piranhas, he chose to jump in after the few that escaped into the river, we will never know. What happened to Gronk after being swallowed and subsequently cutting himself out of a shark, we will never know. And why Gronk decided to try to consume that shark whole, we will never know. What we do know now, is that Gronk has a severe shark allergy, and I think we all regret not knowing that earlier. Goodbye, Gronk, goodbye. And in your own eternal words, "Gronk."

FUTURE plc
30 Monmouth St., Bath, Avon, BA1 2BW, England
www.thefuturenetwork.plc.uk / Tel +44 1225 442244
CHIEF EXECUTIVE: **Stevie Spring**
GROUP FINANCE DIRECTOR: **John Bowman**

REPRINTS: Contact Reprint Management Services, 717-399-1900, ext. 100.
SUBSCRIPTION QUERIES: Please visit www.pcgamer.com, email PCGcustserv@cdsfulfillment.com, call 800-898-7159, or write to PC Gamer Customer Care, P.O. Box 5158, Harlan, IA 51593-0658.
ISSN-1080-4471

WWW.PCGAMER.COM